



College Admissions During COVID:

**How to Navigate the New Challenges in
Admissions, Testing, Financial Aid, and More**

By Robert Franek

America's Leading College Expert from The Princeton Review

PrincetonReview.com

| Penguin
Random
House |

VISIT...

LANZAROTE
Caliente.COM

COLLEGE ADMISSIONS DURING COVID

*How to Navigate the
New Challenges in Admissions,
Testing, Financial Aid, and More*



ROBERT FRANEK
AMERICA'S LEADING COLLEGE EXPERT

The Princeton Review®





College Admissions During COVID:

**How to Navigate the New Challenges in
Admissions, Testing, Financial Aid, and More**

By Robert Franek

America's Leading College Expert from The Princeton Review

PrincetonReview.com

| Penguin
Random
House |

Editorial

Rob Franek, Editor-in-Chief
David Soto, Director of Content Development
Stephen Koch, Student Survey Manager
Deborah Weber, Director of Production
Gabe Berlin, Production Design Manager
Selena Coppock, Managing Editor
Aaron Riccio, Senior Editor
Meave Shelton, Senior Editor
Chris Chimera, Editor
Anna Goodlett, Editor
Eleanor Greene, Editor
Orion McBean, Editor
Patricia Murphy, Editorial Assistant

Penguin Random House Publishing Team

Tom Russell, VP, Publisher
Alison Stoltzfus, Publishing Director
Amanda Yee, Associate Managing Editor
Ellen Reed, Production Manager
Suzanne Lee, Designer

The Princeton Review
110 East 42nd St, 7th Floor
New York, NY 10017
Email: editorialsupport@review.com

© 2020 by TPR Education IP Holdings, LLC.

All rights reserved. Published in the United States by Penguin Random House LLC, New York, and in Canada by Random House of Canada, a division of Penguin Random House Ltd., Toronto.

All rankings, ratings, and listings are intellectual property of TPR Education Holdings, LLC. No rankings, ratings, listings, or other proprietary information in this book may be repurposed, abridged, excerpted, combined with other data, or altered for reproduction in any way without express permission of TPR.

ISBN: 9780525571810
Ebook ISBN 9780525571827

The Princeton Review is not affiliated with Princeton University.

Editors: Pia Aliperti and Aaron Riccio
Production Editor: Emma Parker
Production Artist: Deborah Weber

Cover photographs by Jordan Hollender
Cover design by Suzanne Lee

a_prh_5.6.0_c0_r0

Acknowledgments

This book would not have been possible without the following individuals at The Princeton Review and beyond: Pia Aliperti, Kristen O'Toole, Emma Parker, Suzanne Podhurst, Aaron Riccio, and Deborah Weber. My continued thanks to our data collection masters David Soto and Stephen Koch for their successful efforts in collecting and accurately representing the statistical data that informs parts of this book.

Most of all, thank you to my readers—I hope this book proves useful in your college searches, applications, and overall college admission journeys. Keep asking the tough questions. Good luck!

Robert Franek

Table of Contents

Cover

Title Page

Copyright

Acknowledgments

Author's Note

Get More (Free) Content

Introduction

How has college admissions changed during COVID-19?

Is remote college learning worth the price?

What is the “best” college?

Chapter 1: College Research

How has COVID-19 changed college life?

What criteria should I use to find a college or university where I can succeed?

How important are college rankings?

When should I start my college research?

How many schools should I apply to?

How can I research colleges if I can't visit campus?

Chapter 2: Standardized Tests

How are SAT or ACT test scores used in the admission process and how important are they?

Will colleges see my PSAT scores?

How is the PSAT used in determining National Merit Scholarships?

What does it mean when a college is “test optional”?

Should I still take the ACT or SAT during COVID?

What can I do to get into a test-optional school?

Which test should I choose: SAT or ACT?

When should I take the SAT or ACT?

If I take either test more than once, which scores will colleges see?

How can I improve my standardized test scores during COVID?

What should I do if my SAT or ACT score wasn't great and I can't get another testing spot?

What are SAT Subject Tests? Which ones should I take, and when?

Do I need to take AP exams?

What should I expect if I need to take an at-home AP exam?

What's an International Baccalaureate (IB) Diploma? How do college admission counselors treat an IB diploma?

Chapter 3: High School Transcripts

How do I make online learning work for me?

What should I be doing in 9th and 10th grades to prepare for the college admission process?

What should I be doing in 11th and 12th grades to prepare for the college admission process?

How will pass/fail grading affect my admission chances?

Is it better to have a B in an honors/AP course or an A in a regular/easier course?

My school doesn't publish class rank. Will that hurt my application?

What carries more weight on a college application: GPA or test scores?

Which electives should I take?

How do admission counselors view applications from public school students vs. private school students?

How do I address my high school disciplinary record on my application?

Chapter 4: Extracurricular Activities

How do college admission officers view extracurricular activities within an application?

What should I do if my extracurricular activities were canceled?

Does having a job carry as much weight as school-related extracurricular activities?

What sort of jobs/extracurriculars can I do during a pandemic?

How will student athletes be impacted by COVID-19 admissions changes?

What about “grit”?

Chapter 5: Financial Aid & Scholarships

What is the FAFSA?

What is my Expected Family Contribution?

What's the CSS/Financial Aid Profile?

What financial information do I need to apply for financial aid using the FAFSA and/or the CSS Profile?

How does the financial aid application process differ from the admission process?

What is in my financial aid package?

What is the difference between need-based and merit-based financial aid?

How do I look for scholarships?

How do I save/pay for college?

What is a need-blind school?

Will I be penalized if I apply for financial aid? Will colleges look favorably on me if I don't apply for financial aid?

Can I appeal my financial aid decision?

Is it a smart move to attend a two year / associates degree-granting school first to save money?

Chapter 6: Application

What is the Common Application?

Are there other applications like the Common Application? Is one better than another?

What do admission officers look for in an application essay?

When should I start the application process?

Should I declare a major on my application or apply undecided?

How important is optional or supplementary application material?

Is a college interview required? What should I expect?

Who should I ask to write my letters of recommendation?

Chapter 7: Inside the Admission Office

What are my chances of getting into my dream school?

How are my application materials reviewed?

Who is on the admission committee?

What is the single most important thing admission officers look for in an application?

Will applying Early Decision or Early Action give me a leg up?

What does it mean to be deferred? What can I do to improve my chances of acceptance?

What are my chances of getting off the waitlist?

Do admission officers look at prospective students' social media accounts?

Chapter 8: Etc.

Is the admission process different for international students?

How difficult is transferring between colleges?

Should I take a gap year and wait until the situation returns to “normal”?

How can a parent participate most effectively in their child's college application process?

How do I balance schoolwork, extracurriculars, test prep, college applications, family, social life, and SANITY?!

Appendix

About the Author



Hands down, what I love best about my job here at The Princeton Review is spending direct, quality time with college-bound students and their families. It sounds like a canned talking point, right? The head of content for a global educational services company likes working with students and their families? But, I'm not fibbing, not even a syllable. Here's why—every day you teach me how to be better at my job.

I spend most of the academic year speaking to students, parents, counselors, and educators alike. Whether I'm teaching students and parents the basics or the more advanced lessons around the college process, the most motivating part of that exchange is always the privilege of listening to each of you. Here's the logic: if I can understand your college goals along with the stuff that stresses you, confuses you, and plain-old scares you about the admissions process, then I can create the right kinds of resources to put you on the path to achieving those goals. Meeting and talking with you only reinforces my overall mission to assuage anxiety around the college admission process and create the next class of informed and fearless college shoppers. Now, that's awesome, indeed!

Right now, anxiety is high for students applying to college during the coronavirus pandemic. Throughout this book, you'll find clear answers to the most frequent, savvy, and pressing questions I've received over the last several years, including those that have been recently pouring in on our YouTube channel about COVID-19's effect on things like remote learning, gap years, and test-optional schools. I haven't just been reaching millions of people this year alone through TV, radio, and online sources: I've been listening, and I want to give you actionable next steps, now more than ever.

Wondering how to handle applications if your extracurriculars were canceled due to lockdowns? How to research colleges if you can't visit campus? Which standardized tests to take? Have nitty-gritty questions about

your high school schedule? How about the financial aid process? I've got you covered for each of these key questions, and so many more. My goal, and ours at The Princeton Review, is to help you succeed in each step of your educational journey. Consider *College Admissions During COVID* your primer to do just that.

This book was revised specifically for students graduating in 2021/2022, but it's also a useful guide for any student in high school, parents of high schoolers (and even middle schoolers), parents who attended college themselves, parents who didn't attend college, families new to the United States, and more. In short, no one should ever feel excluded or unprepared for the college search and application process. From SAT scores to scholarships, this book provides straightforward answers to questions about college topics and is meant for anyone and everyone interested in attending college.

Thanks to each of you for putting your faith in me and our full team at The Princeton Review. I very much hope you find this book a great resource in your college admission journey. It's been a genuine pleasure bringing it to you.

Robert Franek

Get More **(Free)** Content

at PrincetonReview.com/guidebooks

As easy as **1•2•3**

1

Go to PrincetonReview.com/guidebooks and enter the following ISBN for your book: **9780525571827**



2

Answer a few simple questions to set up an exclusive Princeton Review account. *(If you already have one, you can just log in.)*



3

Enjoy access to your **FREE** content!



Need to report a potential **content** issue?

Contact EditorialSupport@review.com and include:

- full title of the book
- ISBN
- page number

Need to report a **technical** issue?



Contact TPRStudentTech@review.com and provide:

- your full name
- email address used to register the book
- full book title and ISBN
- Operating system (Mac/PC) and browser (Firefox, Safari, etc.)

Once you've registered, you can...

- Take a full-length practice SAT and/or ACT
- Get valuable advice about the college application process, including tips for writing a great essay and where to apply for financial aid
- If you're still choosing between colleges, use our searchable rankings of *The Best 386 Colleges* to find out more information about your dream school
- Access the Index to this book and a variety of printable resources including: a high school testing calendar and college prep checklists
- Check to see if there have been any corrections or updates to this edition



Students, you face a college admissions landscape unlike any before. The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has radically upended the admissions process. You'll face new challenges in everything from standardized testing and grades to extracurriculars and college visits. The aim of this book is to help you navigate applying to college during COVID and answer the essential application questions that high school students and parents ask me about on the official The Princeton Review YouTube channel, at college-bound events and webinars, and that our own college admission experts hear from clients.

Before I get into the nitty-gritty details of the college admission process, however, I want to address the big picture.

How has college admissions changed during COVID-19?

Planning, applying, and paying for college can be an arduous and anxiety-inducing process in the best of times. Factor in the emotional, physical, and financial challenges of a global world health crisis, and the 2019–2020 college admissions cycle was hands down the most unusual one in recent memory. For lots of graduating, college-bound seniors, so many factors had changed—from the ability (or lack thereof) to go on campus visits to changing financial aid needs to a newfound desire to stay close to home. By and large, college-bound students had already submitted their applications by the time that COVID-19 impacted plans for the winter/spring of 2020. So, while the challenges students faced in the previous admission cycle were certainly extraordinary, students in the graduating high school classes of 2021 and 2022 are facing a college admissions landscape unlike any before.

You'll be contending with uncharted territory both in your own high

schools and in the colleges to which you'll be applying. You may find yourself in smaller in-person classes, traveling to school on a staggered schedule, or attending virtual classrooms. Your testing dates for standardized tests like the ACT and SAT may change, as might the testing environment and even format of the test, much like how the APs became a shorter, online-only exam in 2020. Your extracurricular options may dwindle, especially when it comes to athletics, and your GPA may be impacted by the decision of some districts to switch to pass/fail grading. At the same time, you'll be applying to colleges that may be fully operational for in-person instruction, partially operational on a hybrid model (with some students on campus and others remote), or be fully closed for in-person learning.

These are no ordinary times, but colleges understand that.

In the summer of 2020, more than 360 admissions leaders issued a collective statement titled "Care Counts in Crisis: College Admissions Deans Respond to COVID-19."¹ The signatories are representatives from all eight Ivy League schools, as well as MIT, The University of Chicago, a number of top liberal arts colleges including Bowdoin, Haverford, and Williams; and major public research institutions like University of Arizona, University of Michigan, and The University of Texas at Austin. The document offers guidance to college applicants navigating the 2020-2021 admission cycle on everything from academic work and standardized tests to extracurriculars, and summer activities. Simply put, "Care Counts in Crisis" is a document that outlines what admissions deans expect—and don't expect—from applicants applying to college during a pandemic. They write:

As admission and enrollment leaders, we recognize that we and the institutions we represent send signals that can shape students' priorities and experiences throughout high school. This collective statement seeks to clarify what we value in applicants during this time of COVID-19. We are keenly aware that students across the country and the world are experiencing many uncertainties and challenges. We primarily wish to underscore our commitment to equity and to encourage in students self-care, balance, meaningful learning, and care for others.

Folks, the very first item in the document is about self-care, which should be very encouraging. From there, these admissions leaders assure students—like you—that colleges will assess your application in the context of the obstacles you have faced. You will not be disadvantaged because of your school's decision to go pass/fail in place of letter grades, the cancellation of extracurriculars, a lack of access to standardized tests, new responsibilities at home, or because you weren't able to visit campuses in person. You will be viewed in the context of the curriculum, academic resources, and supports

available to *you*.

Not convinced? Both the Common Application and the Coalition for College application provide opportunities for students to describe exactly how they have been impacted by the pandemic. You are also encouraged to communicate to colleges any factors that may have affected your academic performance—from caring for a sick relative or working to supplement your family income to having no quiet place to study.

What does that all mean in practice for college admissions? Let’s take a quick look at the factors that affect your future college admissions chances with an emphasis on what’s changed and what remains the same. Believe me, we’ll go into much more detail for each topic—often an entire chapter’s worth—throughout the rest of this book.

High School GPA

Your high school GPA is still *the* most important factor in college admission decisions. I know that the tectonic changes you’ve experienced transitioning to online or hybrid learning in your high schools have presented both challenges and opportunities. For example, in addition to moving to online learning, many high schools have also adopted pass/fail grading to ensure fairness for students, which is a great thing! However, only letter-grade classes count toward your GPA, so you’ll need to make sure that all future letter-grade classes reflect your best-possible performance. If you’ve got fewer of these overall, the ones you do have will count more heavily. All of that said, colleges know that there’s a global pandemic going on. If you are taking letter-grade classes, and your grades slide a bit right now, they will understand why (especially if you communicate your specific circumstances on your application), and they’ll take that into account.

Standardized Tests

Your SAT and ACT scores take the lead, but admissions officers consider your performance on other standardized tests as well. These are important not just for admission but also, in many cases, for merit-based aid. What will happen if you can’t take these tests? Or, if you can’t take them as many times as you’d hoped to get your target score?

First, know that the College Board (maker of the SAT) and ACT, Inc. are committed to ensuring that students will be able to safely take these tests, even if these testing bodies need to get creative about how they offer them. A growing number of colleges are going “test-optional” and have removed testing requirements for applicants, either temporarily or as a permanent measure to shift the focus of the application to the student’s overall high

school experience. Still, if you *can* take the SAT/ACT, you should. Going test-optional doesn't mean that a college won't look at scores, just that it doesn't require them. Given that there are lots of ways you aren't able to distinguish yourself right now (if you can't play sports or music or act in plays, for example, because of school closures), standardized tests can provide a chance to shine.

Extracurricular Activities

Colleges will have to recalibrate how they evaluate applicants' extracurricular activities, understanding that opportunities have changed. After all, you may not be meeting up with your Model United Nations team right now, competing in Math League competitions, or taking to the stage for Drama Club. For students whose schools have cancelled extracurriculars, whose clubs or sports teams are on hiatus, or who have new family responsibilities barring them from taking part, take heart. Schools won't penalize you for not availing yourself of an opportunity that doesn't exist!

Honors and Awards

Colleges usually consider awards and honors in making admission decisions. I know many of you are deserving of awards and honors but are missing out because programs are (or were) temporarily put on hold. Again, don't worry. Colleges truly understand.

College Essays

Friends, this is one area of your application over which you have full control no matter what else is going on. Your college essays are more important than ever! Take extra care to make an outline, write, edit, and then edit some more. Think about what makes you *you*. You may opt to write about how COVID-19 is affecting you, but keep in mind that a lot of other students are likely to choose that topic, as well. Make sure that whatever you write about reveals something about who you are and what you value.

College Interviews

Many colleges encourage you to interview with an admissions representative or alumnus as part of the college application process. It's another chance to show off the unique personality traits that you'll bring to college and build a personal relationship with admissions gatekeepers. Your college interview may take place over Skype or Zoom, as many already do. Having experienced a lot of online learning throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, you're likely to be readier than ever to ace your video interview.

Recommendation Letters

Recommendation letters haven't changed a jot. Your teachers want to see you succeed and can still help you stand apart by singing your praises and helping to develop the picture of who you are as a person. You'll learn more about how to make remote learning work for you and maintain relationships with teachers in Chapter 3.

Demonstrated Interest

Finally, colleges take into account your demonstrated interest—all the things you've done to show that you're a good fit for their school and that you'd be likely to attend if you were accepted. You may not be able to visit in person, but you can take an online tour. You can comb through the school website. You can talk to or email with current students. Convey your sincere interest in your application and any communication you have with members of the admission team. Schools are dealing with a lot of upheaval, too, so you're likely to have an advantage in the process if they know that you're as keen on them as they are on you.

These are no ordinary times, but colleges understand that.

The bottom line is that lots of colleges—especially those that tend to draw students from across the country and the world—are dealing with tremendous uncertainty, just like you. They are making Herculean efforts to be fair and are not penalizing students for circumstances beyond their control. Stay focused, my friends! Keep up with your studies, stay sharp with your skills, and remain optimistic for the future.

Next, I want to address two perennial questions that tend to appear on op-ed pages each fall.

Is remote college learning worth the price?

The cost of a four-year degree has been increasing faster than inflation for over 30 years. Ninety-nine percent of participants in our “College Hopes and Worries” survey reported that financial aid will be necessary to pay for college in 2020. At many institutions, financial aid includes loans—so graduates often enter an uncertain job market already loaded with debt. Add on the fact that colleges on your list may be holding classes online right now, at least for a while. With that in mind, is college really the path to professional success and financial stability? Is a college degree, let alone a *remote* college degree, worth the cost of tuition?

My answer is an emphatic “yes!” Of course, I’m biased—I’ve worked in and around college admissions for over 25 years. I have seen firsthand how young people use the tools and experiences they acquire in colleges and universities to achieve their personal and professional goals. Fortunately, there are plenty of data to confirm my anecdotal observations.

In 2019, adults with a bachelor’s degree saw significantly higher median earnings and a lower unemployment rate than those with only a high school diploma.

2019 Median Annual Earnings	
Bachelor's degree	\$45,000
High school diploma only	\$30,000
All workers	\$38,000

Note: Data are for persons age 25 and over. Earnings are for full-time wage and salary workers. Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics

In fact, the Center on Education and the Workforce at Georgetown University calculates that a bachelor’s degree itself is worth \$2.8 million on average over a lifetime, and bachelor’s degree holders earn 84 percent more than those with a high school diploma alone.²

According to the College Board’s 2019 report “Education Pays,” individuals with a college education are more likely to:

- Participate in retirement plans offered by their employers;
- Receive health insurance through their employers;

- Vote in elections;
- Donate their time through volunteer activities.

These are merely the quantifiable gains—you'll have many, many valuable experiences on campus or as a direct result of your college experience. (I wrote about such experiences in another book, *Colleges That Create Futures: 50 Schools That Launch Careers by Going Beyond the Classroom*.)

I'm here to tell you that there are even bonus *benefits* to online or remote learning in college. You'll have more direct interactions with faculty, who are necessarily changing their lesson formats to include interactive features that make class more like a conversation and less like a lecture. Odds are your class materials will be presented in bite-sized pieces that work better with the average student's attention span and are coupled with opportunities to ask and answer questions and respond with video or audio assignments. Online programs also tend to be more flexible with synchronous (live) and asynchronous (pre-recorded) formats that allow you to study on your own schedule. Video conferencing tools can even help you stay better connected with your fellow classmates. According to Timothy White, the chancellor of California State University, the nation's largest public university system and one which will be offering most coursework online throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, there are career benefits to online work, too. He said, "That's actually sort of field training for the future workforce, because when [students] graduate, chances are going to be increasing every day that they will be working in a virtual space in the future."³ Ultimately, you can (and should) factor your colleges' reopening responses into your ultimate decision by asking a lot of questions about what classes, facilities, dining halls, and more will actually look like during COVID-19.

There are still many unknowns as to what college life will be like in 2021 and 2022, but here's what I do know: If there's a school you want to attend and you have the opportunity to go, then go! Go even if "going" means putting on headphones and talking to your computer camera (for now). Go even if it means deferring your acceptance and taking classes at a local community college or doing remote work and then going in-person in a year. (I give plenty of advice on taking a gap year in Chapter 8). But make plans to pursue your dreams—in whatever way feels right for you and your family.

If you, like me, accept the premise that a college degree is most definitely worth the cost of tuition, then that brings us to the other big question that so many students, parents, and media commentators grapple with.

What is the “best” college?

There isn't one.

It might seem silly to include a question in this book that has no answer, but this is an important point that will help put your whole college admission journey into perspective. I understand why folks ask. Given the awesome lifetime benefits we know a student can obtain with a college degree, it's common to make a correlative leap: the more prestigious the alma mater, the greater the rewards for the graduate. The data point that often demonstrates prestige or reputation—that is often a major factor in college ranking methodologies—is a college or university's selectivity.

According to our annual College Hopes and Worries survey, Stanford University has been the #1 Dream School for college-bound students and their parents for several years running. Stanford enjoys an excellent reputation, provides world-class resources, and features an impressive roster of alumni. We don't need to rely on our survey results to know it's a highly desirable school—in 2019 over 47,000 students applied for admission. Stanford accepted just 4 percent of the applicant pool. Are the roughly 45,000 students who applied to Stanford and did not get in doomed to failure?

Of course not! And therein lies the fatal flaw in the myth of “the best college.” There may not be a single best overall college, but there are absolutely schools that are the best for each and every one of those applicants and there's a best school for you out there too.

Don't let this assumption create an enormous amount of anxiety for you and your parents by creating the impression that the choices made in high school determine, or limit, all future opportunities. You do not have to attend a highly selective school in order to pursue a meaningful and lucrative career.

School	Grads median starting salary*	Grads median mid-career salary*	% grads reporting high job meaning*	% applicants accepted**
Massachusetts Institute of Technology	\$86,300	\$155,200	52%	7%
State University of New York— Maritime College	\$74,700	\$156,300	55%	74%
Wittenberg University	\$53,000	\$114,500	66%	74%
University of North Dakota	\$53,800	\$96,000	54%	81%
Santa Clara University	\$70,400	\$146,700	45%	49%

**Data from [PayScale.com](https://payscale.com) College Salary Report 2019–20*

***Data reported to The Princeton Review by the school from fall 2019 through spring 2020*

The road to college is long, and students and their supporters want to be sure their hard work will pay off with a degree and experience that pave the way to a successful career. But after twenty-five years in this business, I can assure you that college and career prep are not one-size-fits-all—there are over 3,000 four-year colleges in the United States. Thoughtful research and reflection will help you find the schools that fit you best.

Applying to schools that line up with your goals and interests also helps your chances of gaining acceptance. You will likely be asked why you want to attend a particular school in a supplemental essay or interview, and “Because you’re the best!” won’t cut it. If you identify the specific opportunities on campus that are exciting to you, that enthusiasm will come through on your application. Admissions officers are looking for students who will be active participants in their college community.

Now that we’ve dispensed with the “best college” myth, I have plenty to share with you about how to set yourself up for success in high school, maximize your SAT and ACT scores, find the colleges and universities that will fit you best, and craft competitive applications during COVID-19 and beyond.

Survey Says

What's the biggest benefit of college?

45% say the potentially better job and higher income

34% say the exposure to new ideas

21% say the education

*Results of The Princeton Review's College Hopes & Worries Survey of college applicants and parents of college applicants.

-
1. <https://mcc.gse.harvard.edu/resources-for-colleges/endorse-care-counts-in-crisis-college-admissions-deans-respond-to-covid-19>
 2. <https://cew.georgetown.edu/cew-reports/the-college-payoff/>
 3. <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/education/2020/06/22/coronavirus-reopening-college-fall-2020/3210719001/>



Chapter 1

College Research

How has COVID-19 changed college life?

What criteria should I use to find a college or university where I can succeed?

How important are college rankings?

When should I start my college research?

How many schools should I apply to?

How can I research colleges if I can't visit campus?

CHAPTER 1

College Research

On The Princeton Review's annual College Hopes & Worries survey we ask nearly 12,000 high school students and their parents to answer a simple question: What would be your dream college if academic admission and cost weren't factors? Let's take a gander at the most recent results, shall we?

TOP 10 DREAM SCHOOLS	
Student Hopes	Parent Worries
1. Stanford University	
2. Harvard College	
3. Massachusetts Institute of Technology	
4. University of California—Los Angeles	
5. New York University	
6. University of Pennsylvania	
7. Princeton University	
8. Columbia University	
9. University of Michigan—Ann Arbor	
10. University of California—Berkeley	

Notice a trend? It's never been easier to get into college than it is today because there are literally 3,000 four-year colleges in the U.S. alone. But it's never been harder to get into college because we're all applying to the same small pool of schools!

The most common word on my lips when advising students and parents on the college selection process is “fit.” Each of the colleges on the lists above is a fabulous school. While they all could be terrific fits for some students, I can guarantee you that they're not ideal fits for every student who jotted down those names on their list of dream colleges. Why? No two students are exactly alike, and no two colleges are exactly alike, either. Any college can be a dream school for the right student, and any student can find a college that will give them a terrific education and college experience.

How has COVID-19 changed college life?

There's no doubt about it. College life *has* changed. Norms on campus—both virtual and physical—are continuing to change semester to semester as schools implement new health rules and practices. At The Princeton Review we've been closely monitoring how different institutions are making the transition from in-person classes to online and hybrid learning (and vice versa). Of course, we're hearing of lots of plans among college officials to make masks, hand sanitizer, and COVID-19 screenings readily available. Be prepared to see some new ways of doing things on campus from the rise of digital textbooks to the fall of buffet-style eating in the cafeteria. As you plan for the future, researching this information is incredibly important—it can help you figure out what school and what situation is right for you academically, physically, socially, and, of course, financially. Here are a few examples of changes some colleges were planning for fall of 2020 as this book went to press:

- **Extending the academic term:** At New York University, administrators were designing ways for students to spread classes over two or three semesters (during fall, spring, and summer terms) without charging additional tuition.
- Some schools were **adjusting their academic calendars** to make breaks from campus longer and minimize student travel. The University of South Carolina, for example, planned to reopen with in-person classes for three months and then shift to remote learning after Thanksgiving. Students would complete reading days (dedicated time to study for exams) and take final exams from home.
- Another college strategy to keep their campus communities safe was **making student housing less dense**. Northeastern University in Boston planned to put students in apartments or hotels to make dorms less crowded when campus reopened. The University of Colorado Boulder was planning to house first-years in small cohort groups tied to the courses they were taking. While there's a chance you will not get the stereotypical campus dorm experience, such as up to three roommates and lines for communal bathrooms, that might not be so bad!
- **New dining practices** were making an appearance as colleges aimed to shift how students used campus dining halls. Some schools had new grab-and-go options like the University of Notre Dame, which planned

to replace self-service buffet fare (like salad bar options) with individually portioned and packaged meals. Others planned for students to eat in the dining hall on a schedule, so that it would never be at or near capacity.

- Schools also were making plans for **hybrid learning classes**, which some students would attend physically while others in the same class participated virtually. That was the set up at Syracuse University, which planned to operate some courses on a rotating schedule where half of all students would attend a class in-person one day, with the rest of the class attending virtually. The students would swap spots on alternate days. In short, my friend, schools were getting flexible when it came to delivering classes, with both in-person, online options, and remote options.
- It could be that **smaller class sizes** will be the norm where you enroll, which was the University of Kentucky's game plan—and that already-small classes will be offered in larger rooms.
- Some schools planned for **staggered study** by having certain cohorts of students return to campus while others stayed at home. For instance, students in the sciences whose work required use of lab facilities would return to campus before their peers in the humanities. Stanford University decided to alternate in-person semesters depending on class year. First-years and sophomores were scheduled to come to campus for the fall and summer quarters while juniors and seniors were scheduled to come to campus in the winter and spring.

The bottom line? The folks who run institutions of higher learning care a lot about your education, and they're working hard to ensure that regardless of where you are, you'll still be learning and preparing for your future professional life. Ask a lot of questions about what returning to campus will actually look like to make sure it's something that both you and your parents will feel comfortable with.

What criteria should I use to find a college or university where I can succeed?

When I give talks on college admissions around the country, I break “best fit” into four categories:

- Academic fit
- Cultural fit
- Financial fit
- Career fit

Of course, there are new COVID safety considerations and learning preferences to consider, too. Location may take a leap in importance if you are keen to stay closer to home. Concern about college costs and debt is not new, but that worry may be amplified right now for you and your family, bringing financial aid into sharper focus. Another consideration may be the details of each college’s COVID action plan. After all, coronavirus has caused changes across almost all aspects of university life from how students live and learn to how they enter buildings! Asking questions about what the COVID response on campus entails will help you make sure it’s something that both you and your parents feel comfortable with.

Your Best Academic Fit

This is probably the biggest of the four best-fit buckets. First and foremost, you want a school that offers the major(s) and classes that interest you. Many students have an idea of their major when they begin researching colleges, and a list of schools with strong departments in your field of choice is a great place to begin the college research process. If you’re unsure of your future academic track, don’t fret—you don’t need to map out your entire career in your junior year in high school in order to find your best-fit colleges and universities. Read up on course descriptions and professor bios and look for topics and experiences that inspire you. Enthusiasm is key for getting the most out of your academic experience.

The more information you have about COVID-based course changes, the better.

~~Classroom format is just as important to keep in mind as content.~~ In response to COVID, many colleges are transitioning to online only and hybrid courses. It's not an "all or nothing" setup either. Your course load may end up being a combination of in-person, remote, and blended classes. Find out exactly what's on offer, and for how long, as some formats may be temporary. Generally speaking, academics at liberal arts colleges that matriculate Bachelor of Art or Bachelor of Science degrees are often based on professor-student discussion in seminar-style classes. Larger institutions that offer a broad range of degrees and departments are likely to offer liberal arts style courses as well as larger formats: lectures, labs, and breakout sessions with teaching assistants (typically graduate students). You'll want to find out from the admissions office how these course formats will translate digitally. Will classes for undergraduates be fully remote or blended? Will coursework be delivered synchronously (with professors and students online working on the same material at the same time) or asynchronously (with professors and students online at different times working through the material at their own pace)? Will lectures be delivered live or pre-recorded? The more information you have about COVID-based course changes, the better, even if it's only applicable for a short while.

Choosing a college where the courses on offer match your learning style will set you up to succeed. To the same point, look for academic support resources you might need. Most campuses have writing centers (often dedicated specifically to first year students in required college writing courses) and peer-to-peer tutoring available to all students. Will these services be available to you if the college transitions to remote learning, and, if so, how will they be administered? If you plan to formally apply for support services, be sure to contact the academic support center on campus to review requirements, the approval process, and available resources. (You can learn more about specific services and applying for academic support in *The K&W Guide to Colleges for Students with Learning Differences* by my friends Marybeth Kravets and Imy Wax.)

Not all academic opportunities happen in the classroom, either. Go beyond department descriptions to look at any dedicated resources, opportunities to travel here or abroad, or experiential learning centers on campus (and make sure they're available to undergraduates!). Again, all of the usual campus opportunities may not be available *at first*, but it's good to look ahead.

- Students at University of Alabama's College of Communication and Information Science can gain valuable professional experience at their Digital Media Center.
- In Maine, Bowdoin College owns several acres on a nearby island, home to the Schiller Coastal Studies Center, providing hands-on

research tools for environmental studies and biology students.

- At Babson College in Wellesley, Massachusetts, the Center for Women’s Entrepreneurial Leadership is available to undergraduate students through the CWEL Scholars program. CWEL Scholars work with “near-peer” mentors and gain professional competencies like presentation and negotiation skills.

Go beyond the classroom to look at travel, research, and experiential learning opportunities.

These are just three examples—each of these schools offers tons of other opportunities, and every college and university in the country has unique resources and programs.

Does all of the above sound aggressively aspirational? Good. Aspiration is the secret sauce that helps you stay motivated and engaged through the long college application process and can help shine a spotlight on your application for admission officers. Ultimately, though, academic fit isn’t based solely on aspirations: eventually, you will need to look at the application data each university releases annually and compare it to your own stats. If your GPA and standardized test scores fall short of the averages of the current first year class at your dream school, there are two important steps to take:

1. Expand your school list. Even if you have your heart set on a particular institution, I guarantee there is another one where you will be successful and satisfied. You can keep your eyes on your prize school while ensuring that you have more than one backup plan.
2. Make a plan to improve your grades and/or your test scores. This will be tailored to the improvements you want to make and how much time you have to make them before submitting college applications in the fall and winter of your senior year of high school. Chapters 2 and 3 of this book cover standardized tests and high school classes and grades in detail.

Your Best Cultural Fit

“Cultural fit” can be tough to define. In this category, I include some concrete aspects of college life: institution size, demographics, location (and weather, believe it or not), dorms, dining services, extracurricular facilities (like the campus gym or theater) and activities (like clubs, sports, or Greek life), and campus speakers and events. But this category can also include

elements that are harder to quantify. How do you feel when you're on campus or checking out the college community online? You don't have to make a vision board of your college life, but you want to be able to picture yourself feeling comfortable.

What follows is my evergreen advice for cultural fit, but I want to start with a major COVID caveat. Campus life is likely to look totally different than it did for students who graduated even just two years ago. As you research colleges that are combating the spread of coronavirus with far-reaching health and safety plans *now*, it's impossible to know exactly what life will be like when you *enroll*. Large, organized events like intramural sports or rushing a fraternity or sorority could still be on hold or severely impacted. College-sanctioned parties and events, like campus speakers, could be scaled back. While the guidelines below may not universally apply to *this moment in time*, they will help you home in on what actually is—and isn't—important to you.

How do you feel when you're on campus or checking out the college community online?

Start with practical matters: size and location. When I refer to campus size, I'm talking about the student population, not the acreage. The number of students on campus and the percentage of those students who will be your cohort—for example, at a college of liberal arts or engineering within a research university—will influence your day-to-day experience. It's also relevant to student/faculty ratio and class size, which I referenced above in relation to learning style. Typically, schools with low student/faculty ratios see more interaction between those populations, which can allow for additional academic support during office hours and valuable mentor or professional networking relationships. If you're considering larger schools, be sure to ask about registration and accessibility—is it easy to get the classes you want on your schedule, or competitive? This is a great question for current students—I don't recommend harassing strangers, but you will likely meet student representatives when you visit campus (I'll cover more about campus visits and virtual visits later in this chapter), and you can ask the admission office if they have a list of students who have volunteered to answer questions for prospective applicants.

The size of your university will also impact town-gown relations, or the overall relationship between the institution and the surrounding community, which includes your prospects for internships, part-time work, and off-campus activities. There are towns that primarily revolve around the large universities therein, like Ann Arbor, Michigan, or Clemson, South Carolina, and there are

small, rural campuses that offer a more contained experience (which students often describe as a “bubble,” with both positive and negative connotations), like Colby College in Maine or Oberlin College in Ohio. Going to college in a large city where the university is just one of many influences and employers, like Philadelphia or Chicago, is a very different experience that might come with more distractions as well as a wide range of off-campus professional opportunities. You probably already have some idea about whether you’d prefer a rural or suburban campus, or how far from home you’d like to be. Use your campus visits to refine those preferences; what does one experience offer that the other does not? Which more closely aligns with your goals? Whether you want to go to college close to where you grew up or across the country, you will need to factor travel and/or commuting costs into your college financial planning.

Beyond these basics, think about how you want to spend your time outside of class, and look for indicators of campus social life. Do students stay on campus during the weekends? What kind of social events does the school host? Which clubs are the most popular? Does student social life revolve around Saturday football games or quiet get-togethers, or a combination of both? If the school has fraternities and sororities, what percentage of the population goes Greek? These are just a few questions that can help you begin to identify what you want in a school and how to look for it. If you want to pursue any specific extracurricular activities in college, whether they made your high school resume or you want to find new opportunities, that’s a great place to start: Look for clubs or facilities dedicated to those activities and find out what you can about how accessible they are and if there’s a campus community dedicated to what you’re interested in. You might even discover that there’s a club you want to start on campus—if that’s the case, ask about the process for setting up a club charter and available school funding for student groups. This is often the most fun part of college research.

Virtual tours and social media are your friends.

The physical layout of a campus can also tell you a lot about how and where students socialize. First year students living on campus are often housed together and organized into smaller groups under resident advisors (RAs). RAs are there to help facilitate communal living and maintenance of shared spaces, but they may also be responsible for dorm parties and other activities that foster interaction and community-building. Outside the dorms, where do students spend time? In the library or the gym? On the quad or in the coffeehouse? All of the above? A single dining hall on campus can build a sense of unity within the student body, but it might be overwhelming for some

introverted students. (Don't forget to ask about dining services, especially if you have any dietary restrictions. You'll be eating this food for four years, after all.) If most students live off campus after their first year, are there student-friendly neighborhoods and businesses close to campus? I am a big advocate for campus visits (more on that at the end of this chapter), but whenever a campus visit isn't a possibility (and especially during COVID), virtual tours and social media are your friends. Go beyond the official school accounts and check out any school spirit hashtags or geo-tags on campus—that way you'll see real-life posts from real students.

It's impossible to quantify every aspect of a campus social scene, and the best way to observe it is up close. Many schools offer applicants the option to stay with first or second year students in a dorm for the night and see what campus life is really like. You don't have to do this for every school where you plan to apply, but if possible, give it a go at your top choice schools. Because these visits are arranged through the admissions office, they are also a means of indicating your interest in the school to admissions officers. If interviews are a part of the admissions process and are available on campus, schedule yours the day after your overnight visit. Your impressions of the campus will be fresh, so the interviewer will gain insight into what excites you about the school, and spending time on campus will give you a chance to think about what you need to know about the school to be sure it's the best fit for you. Interviewers love good questions as much as good answers.

Your Best Financial Fit

Financial fit boils down to one question: Can you afford to attend this school?

I never tell students to cross a school off their list solely because it's too expensive—there is a lot of financial aid out there (\$186.9 billion total undergraduate student aid was available in 2018–19, according to the College Board's "Trends in Student Aid" report) and many different paths to pay for college. But when it comes time to commit to a college in the spring of your senior year of high school, it's important to consider cost. Keep that pricey private school on your list, but apply to a "financial safety school," too. That's a college or university that fits you academically and culturally and that you know you can afford—look at public universities, where tuition is cheaper for state residents. Other options here include living at home or with relatives while attending school, saving the cost of room and board, or attending a community college for a year or two and then transferring to your dream university for a degree. The latter is a very affordable path to a college degree, but bear in mind that you will need to maintain stellar grades in order to be accepted as a transfer student at a competitive institution.

Parents, you will most likely bear most of the responsibility for defining “financial fit” for your student. It is very important to take a hard look at your finances, make a budget covering the tuition you can afford, and review financial aid options. I cover this in more detail in Chapter 5, and you can find detailed strategies for saving money and completing necessary forms in our book *Paying for College: Everything You Need to Maximize Financial Aid and Afford College* by my friend Kal Chany. Every school that receives federal aid is required to offer students a “calculator” that will help them project the financial aid they will receive (keep in mind that these calculators are rarely exact). As I noted in my introduction, many aid packages include loans, and you can look up the average debt carried by recent graduates of every institution for a ballpark estimate on what your student will be carrying when he or she enters the job market. Some selective institutions advertise that their policy allows them to meet demonstrated student need entirely without loans—if that is the primary reason you are interested in an institution, contact the financial aid office for details early on in your application process. Even with such policies, not every student will graduate debt-free.

Your Best Career Fit

In addition to making sure the schools you’re considering offer the majors and classes that interest you, I also recommend visiting or contacting the career development center at each. Find out how the school supports students in preparing for the professional world: do they offer resume writing workshops? Practice interviews? Networking events with alumni? If you foresee yourself in a particular field, location, or specific workplace, ask about past students’ track records of finding internships and entry-level jobs in those areas. College admission officers and career counselors are happy to highlight their institutions’ success stories! If you’re not sure yet which direction you’ll go in, see if career coaching and personal evaluations are available for students. Make sure you ask how these services are adapting to COVID-19, as well! Lake Forest College in Illinois, for example, told us at The Princeton Review that their career services department was “pivoting strategically” in response to COVID to “support students in building their credentials in ways that will stand out to employers, and connect them with mentors and hiring professionals to grow their networks.” Many institutions extend career support to alumni, too, which can be invaluable in the early post-collegiate years. As more and more students are factoring their professional plans into their college decision process, college admission and recruitment officers emphasize career support and placement when pitching their schools to prospective applicants.

Survey Says

Which college are you (or your child) most likely to choose?

44% say college with the best program for my (my child's) career interests

39% say college that will be the best overall fit

9% say college that will be the most affordable

8% say college with the best academic reputation

*Results of The Princeton Review's College Hopes & Worries Survey of college applicants and parents of college applicants.

How important are college rankings?

On the one hand, I kicked off this book by telling you there's no one best college to rule them all, so you might be expecting me to say college rankings aren't very important. On the other hand, I also publish an annual *Best Colleges* book full of college ranking lists. In the words of Walt Whitman, "Do I contradict myself? Very well then I contradict myself, (I am large, I contain multitudes.)"

It's important to understand the methodology behind any college ranking list you're using to fully understand what the ranking is telling you about the school.

There are a lot of different college ranking lists available. Think of these as tools to help you find your best-fit school. A list that claims to rank schools overall is not a very precise tool. These lists are often based on the GPA and standardized test scores of enrolled students and on the school's acceptance rate. That doesn't make the #1 ranked college the best college, it makes it the most competitive. And rankings that include things like "reputation" or "prestige" typically define those as the opinions of academics or other college presidents, not employers or hiring managers or even current students. It's important to understand the methodology behind any ranking list you're using to fully understand what the ranking is telling you about the school. "Best value" college lists are typically based on college costs, financial aid packages, and graduate debt, and thus are perhaps more informative than ranking lists based on selectivity and reputation. If you're looking at a "best value" college ranking list, check the methodology for data points that underscore student success: retention (i.e., the percentage of students that return for sophomore year), 4-year graduation rate, and data that points to career placement or starting salary. These factors really do add up to a meaningful measurement of value.

Narrowly defined college ranking lists in specific categories that reflect what is important to you can really help you identify your best fit schools. The Princeton Review publishes over sixty undergraduate lists annually, most of which are based on surveys of current students—the only experts on what life

is like on their campuses. We survey tens of thousands of students annually to be sure we have an accurate, up-to-date picture of life on campus. We ask students how many hours they study outside of class each week, what they think of their school administration, career services, research opportunities, study abroad programs, campus newspaper, college town, and tons more. We ask about dorms, food, political leanings, and even how happy students are (though the latter occasionally inspires some existential rumination in our open ended answers). We know which school has the top-rated radio station and theater productions, and even how much students are drinking on campus. Every year I get a few calls from administrators who are worried about where their schools landed on the rankings, but my goal is to impart information provided by real students to real applicants. You need a full and honest picture of campus life to find the schools that will best fit your goals, your learning style, and your personality.

Campus Visit Advice from a Student Who Has Been There

“Try to focus the most on what college is the best fit in terms of aligning with your future goals. Look at colleges that will allow you to explore your interests. There are thousands of hidden gems that people ignore because people focus solely on [best overall] rankings.”

—College Hopes & Worries Survey

When should I start my college research?

You will want to have your final list of colleges by early fall of senior year. Making that list will require a lot of research and synthesizing information, so it's a good idea to start browsing colleges in 10th grade. Start by making a list of every college that appeals to you, and then get to work learning about each one. You may end up crossing some off quickly as you learn, for example, that they don't graduate many students in your field of interest. This early research phase will help you define your best fit school criteria, as well. As you shape your list, look for common elements among the schools that interest you, and seek out other colleges and universities that share those qualities. If there's a college counselor at your school, ask for a meeting or video chat to discuss your interests. Your college counselor may be able to recommend schools for your list, and help identify additional support you may need to get into college, like an academic tutor, standardized test prep, or a private college coach. (Even if your counselor is not available to you until the 11th grade, starting your research early will help you find any gaps in your academic and admissions resources.) If you have a list of twenty possible schools where you'd consider applying at the end of 10th grade, you're well on your way to finding the college that fits you best. You may have a much shorter list if you had a clear idea of your "best fit" when you began your search, but there's no need to limit your options yet.

As you shape your list, look for common elements among the schools that interest you.

During your junior year, your top priorities should be earning stellar grades and nailing your standardized tests (Chapter 2 covers the SAT and ACT in full), but you'll need to refine that list a little. This is a good time to reach out to any current students you know and to begin visiting campuses if possible. If there is a virtual college fair in your area, or college reps visit your high school, take the time to meet with them. By the end of junior year, you will want to have a clear idea where you want to go, what "best fit" means to you, and whether your grades and test scores are competitive for the schools on your list.

How many schools should I apply to?

I recommend choosing somewhere between 6 to 8 schools:

- 2 dream schools (or “reach” schools)
- 2 to 4 match schools (where you’ll probably, but not necessarily, be accepted)
- 2 safety schools (you and your counselor are very confident you’ll be accepted and able to afford tuition)

You can adjust this number up or down as needed, but you should apply to at least one school in each category, and you don’t need to apply to ten or more schools.

Survey Says

How many colleges do students apply to?

38% said they (or their child) would apply to 5 to 8 colleges

33% said they (or their child) would apply to 1 to 4 colleges

20% said they (or their child) would apply to 9 to 12 colleges

9% said they (or their child) would apply to 13 or more colleges

*Results of The Princeton Review’s College Hopes & Worries Survey of college applicants and parents of college applicants.

A Crash Course in College Research

These seven sources of information have become staples for most college-bound students in their search for the right institution:

1. **College admission websites, brochures, videos, and catalogs.** You’ll get a good idea of a school’s academic offerings and admission requirements.
2. **Current students.** No one knows schools better than the students who attend them.

3. **College guides.** The Princeton Review's own *Best Colleges* is a great narrative guide based on real student quotes about their colleges.
4. **College profiles.** The Princeton Review's college search tool (access it at [PrincetonReview/college-search](https://princetonreview.com/college-search)) offers useful information about tuition, financial aid, and more while helping students like you find and compare schools, based on specific criteria.
5. **College rankings.** Our college ranking lists cover a range of topics that applicants might be curious about such as academics, financial aid, campus amenities, and much more.
6. **College forums/discussion boards.** Unfiltered feedback from all types of sources is exciting!
7. **Your college counselor.** They will help guide your overall college search and strategize for your best application when it comes time to apply.

How can I research colleges if I can't visit campus?

Visiting the campuses of the colleges and universities where you are interested in studying is not required for admission but can help you learn if a college is right for you. I've got great news. You do not have to physically visit a campus to get a sense of what life is like there. After all, depending on where you live and the colleges you're considering, it may not be safe for you to embark on the quintessential college road trip right now, and that's assuming the campus is even open or conducting tours, info sessions, and other events that are usually part of the campus visit. It is possible that, in the months ahead, a college on your list might be open for tours, class visits, and on-campus interviews. That's why I'm dividing my advice into two sections: tips for virtual campus visits and tips for physical campus visits.

Tips for Virtual Campus Visits

Many schools offer virtual alternatives to on-campus tours on their websites or through [YouVisit.com](https://www.youvisit.com), which is a great way to get a “visual baseline” for a campus. Some schools kick it up a notch by hosting online dorm tours or providing access to residence hall floor plans. Virtual tours are great, and you can take things even further by using the Google Maps “Street View” feature as a way to explore the campus quads, the facades of libraries and laboratories, as well as parks, restaurants, and transportation options in the surrounding area.

At some schools, it may be an option to sign up to attend a virtual class in a major that interests you. Check the college's website or reach out directly to the admissions office to see what's available. Plus, schools are offering more virtual information sessions, online Q&A's with admissions deans, and live chats on social media than ever before. These offerings are opportunities to ask questions about financial aid, career services, academic support, curriculum requirements (many, though not all, schools have some general education requirements that all students must complete, regardless of major), and availability of classes, particularly for first years and/or prerequisites for more advanced courses. The admissions office at Vanderbilt University in Nashville, Tennessee, for example, sets up virtual coffee meetings so prospective students can chat with current students and faculty, and then, of

course you can always keep in touch by email.

Follow your prospective school's social media accounts, but save time to dig in to non-admissions accounts too, like the Twitter for the club soccer team you'd consider joining if you enrolled or the Instagram for the very popular campus improv group. Take advantage of any connections you might have through your parents, your school counselor, or your friends to get in touch with real students who attend the colleges on your list—they are their college experts, after all. Ask them what they like—and don't like—about their school, what the workload is like, how they spend their days, and anything else that interests you.

Tips for Physical Campus Visits

You probably won't be able to visit every school on your list while classes are in session, so here are my three tips:

- If you can only visit one or two schools (safely!) while students are on campus, make them the schools that excite you the most.
- Check the academic calendars on college websites—if your spring break schedule is different than that of the college, students will be in class while you're free to visit.
- If you're planning to visit colleges over the summer, try to do so in late August—students will be trickling back, varsity athletes will (hopefully!) be on campus for practice, and you may get to see some of the pre-orientation activities the school runs for first-year students.

Your campus visit will most likely include a tour led by a current student, in a group with other prospective applicants and their families. This is an awesome opportunity to get insight into daily life on campus, so do not hesitate to ask your tour guide for their opinion on any aspect of the college. Even if you're curious about a department or extracurricular activity the tour guide does not participate in, they may be able to share insights via roommates or friends. The other high school students in your tour group are also assets—listen to their questions and if you have time, ask about their experiences visiting other schools. How your tour guide answers questions will tell you much more about the school than the history and trivia they're likely reciting as they lead you around.

Schools are offering more virtual information sessions, online Q&A's with admissions deans, and live chats on social media.

Of course, it may not pan out that you go on *all* virtual tours or *all* in-person campus visits. Your research will likely be a mixture of both. (Online research, for example, definitely complements a tour on campus.) As you narrow your list to colleges where you know you want to apply, try to schedule an interview. In most admissions cases, interviews are optional, and are available on campus, via alumni in your area, or on Skype. In your interview, you'll want to come off as articulate about and engaged with the things that are important to you, and have a clear idea of how this school above all others will help you pursue those passions. If you have this conversation when you've just toured campus and/or after you've done your online research and the school's unique features are fresh in your mind, it will be that much smoother.

What's an Information Session?

Here's what to expect:

Colleges host information sessions led by admission officers, which are great ways to learn more about schools that interest you or to find out about a school you're not yet familiar with. In the past, these have been held on campus or locally when colleges visit high schools and college fairs, but many schools now hold these virtually in webinar formats, as live videos on social media, or as pre-recorded videos hosted on their websites.

Info sessions give a broad overview of the college—the size and geographic representation of the college, popular majors, the average class size, special academic programs, and activities many of their students take advantage of.

It's the presenter's job to get the audience interested in the school. So, you'll also hear about any distinctions the college is proud of, like ranking lists they're featured on, the newly built energy efficient dorms, or how many Nobel Prize-winning professors are on campus.

While it's a good idea to bring any questions you have about the college, you're not likely to get answers to questions about your chances of admission, like, "Are my SAT scores high enough?" The presenter isn't in a position to evaluate your candidacy in that setting and will be hesitant to say anything that could later make you feel misled when you get your admissions decision.

Instead, ask questions about the admissions process and the typical student the college admits. That will allow the presenter to give you the information they're comfortable sharing, like whether or not interviews are offered, the ranges of GPAs and test scores for admits, and the importance the school places on essays and letters of recommendations.

Think of a college information session like a more personal version

of a brochure. You may not be able to decide whether or not the college is right for you based on the session alone. You learn more, you get questions answered by a live human being and answered, and you get clues about whether or not you want to do even more research about the school.

10 College Opportunities That Go Beyond the Classroom

Student Internships are temporary paid professional experiences that allow students to gain real-world work experience. They take classes for one semester, work full-time for one semester in their co-op, and repeat.

Real campus example: Northeastern University regularly puts students in 10,000+ co-op placements each year.

Externships are temporary job-shadowing programs that last anywhere from an afternoon to a few weeks.

Real campus example: In the Spring Break Externship Program, Grinnell College matches first and second years with alumni as a way to help students explore a potential career.

Many schools have programs that will fund **internships** or low-paying internships, which allow students to learn more about a field or organization of interest while completing tasks or projects alongside real employees.

Real campus example: Every year, the 500 students in Vassar College's Field Work program lend their talents to nonprofits, government agencies, human services organizations, and businesses.

Many colleges have dedicated leadership centers to **train** and mentor students in crucial skills like communication and teamwork.

Real campus example: Undergrads at Gettysburg College can work with Leadership Coaches to apply for positions on campus and beyond. It's all part of the process to earn a Leadership Certificate from the Garthwait Leadership Center.

Projects are extended problem-solving activities that students can complete solo or in collaboration with a group, like composing a piece of music, writing a business plan, or designing a prototype.

Real campus example: At Arizona State University, the ASU Idea Box, staffed by student entrepreneurs, is a mobile unit that travels to all

	ASU campuses so students can share their business plans with the community.
Research	campus research experiences can include working alongside your professor in a lab, writing a thesis, or completing a capstone project for your major. Real campus example: At Binghamton University, Summer Scholars and Artists Fellowships fund student research and creative projects during the summer.
Service Learning	it sounds, service learning combines a learning experience with community service. Students develop a greater understanding of community issues and gain skills in critical thinking and collaboration. Real campus example: Sharpe Community Scholars at William & Mary participate in local community projects that develop their problem-solving skills.
Student Organizations	clubs bring together students with a common interest and help them have fun and develop leadership skills and gain teamwork experience. Real campus example: Students on the Alma College Model UN team debate current issues, earning valuable skills in public speaking and negotiation.
Entrepreneurial Center, lab, newsroom, or makerspace facilities	campus that lets you build skills while doing something you love. Real campus example: Trinity University has professional radio and HDTV stations on campus where students produce their own content.
Study Abroad	robust study abroad programs help facilitate academic, internship, and cultural experiences outside of the United States. Real campus example: Business and engineering sophomores in the University of Pittsburgh Plus3 Program can study the smartphone industry in China, car manufacturing in Germany, or coffee production in Costa Rica.





Chapter 2

Standardized Tests

How are SAT or ACT test scores used in the admission process and how important are they?

Will colleges see my PSAT scores?

How is the PSAT used in determining National Merit Scholarships?

What does it mean when a college is “test optional”?

Should I still take the ACT or SAT during COVID?

What can I do to get into a test-optional school?

Which test should I choose: SAT or ACT?

When should I take the SAT or ACT?

If I take either test more than once, which scores will colleges see?

How can I improve my standardized test scores during COVID?

What should I do if my SAT or ACT score wasn't great and I can't get another testing spot?

What are SAT Subject Tests? Which ones should I take, and when?

Do I need to take AP exams?

What should I expect if I need to take an at-home AP exam?

What's an International Baccalaureate (IB) Diploma? How do college admission counselors treat an IB diploma?

CHAPTER 2

Standardized Tests

Students often ask me what tests they need to take and when. After all, there's the PSAT, AP exams, and SAT Subject Tests, oh my! SAT and ACT scores take the lead, but college admission officers consider your performance on other standardized tests, as well. High scores can even earn you scholarship dollars. So, what happens if your test is canceled? Or if you didn't get to sit for a test as many times as you'd like?

Colleges understand that there have been massive and unprecedented testing disruptions caused by COVID-19. Many schools have updated their admissions policies (some temporarily), showing, by and large, a laudable degree of flexibility when it comes to standardized test scores. In fact, the "Care Counts in Crisis" statement signed by more than 360 college admission deans in the summer of 2020 explicitly reassures college-bound students that they will not be disadvantaged because of the cancellations of standardized test dates or a lack of access to standardized tests due to the pandemic. (Flip back to the Introduction to learn more about what these signatories had to say about their top priorities for the upcoming admissions cycle.)

Instead, you will be viewed in the context of the curriculum, academic resources, and support *available to you*. If you find that you can't take some of the tests in this chapter or can't take them when you'd hoped, know that you are not alone, and that colleges understand. Admission teams have made a point of saying that they applaud you for your resilience under these very challenging circumstances. Without further ado, here's my best advice on test scores and college admissions.

How are SAT or ACT scores used in the admission process and how important are they?

Colleges truly understand that these are no ordinary times. You won't be penalized for circumstances that are beyond your control. While the ACT or SAT can help you earn admission, financial aid, and academic placements, even at test-optional schools, it's true that many schools have done away with

SAT/ACT admission requirements precisely because students have had to contend with extraordinary challenges—from experiencing illness to school closures to canceled test dates and test centers with limited seating capacity. Still, my advice to you: take the SAT or ACT if you can. Unless a school is “test-blind” (meaning it won’t consider SAT/ACT scores), then strong SAT or ACT scores can help set you apart for both admissions and financial aid.

But let’s back up.

The SAT and ACT are standardized tests that are commonly used in the college admission process. The SAT is scored out of a total of 1600, and the ACT is scored out of a total of 36. The aim of both tests is to reflect students’ preparedness and potential for academic success in college. Some states use either the SAT or ACT as a requirement for high school graduation. Most high school students will take one or both of these tests in 11th or 12th grade.

Why do admissions officers need a standardized test score alongside your high school grades? Because grading methodology differs from one high school to the next—standardized test scores put everyone on the same scale, at least in theory. This is very much a point of debate for those of us who follow college admission trends closely, and familiarity with test-taking techniques like pacing and guessing strategies can help students raise their scores—so the SAT and ACT may not be quite the objective measurements for success that the College Board and ACT, Inc. would have us believe. Regardless, they still present an important hurdle to clear in your race to a college degree, and The Princeton Review was founded to help students clear that hurdle with ease.

The importance of SAT or ACT scores in the college application process is different at each institution of higher education, and many liberal arts schools emphasize their holistic approach to application review, which means your application is read as a story about you rather than a lab report on your education. In response to COVID, more and more schools of all types have been reevaluating their admissions philosophies, adopting permanent or temporary test-optional policies or other accommodations for students who may be disadvantaged by lack of access to the SAT or ACT. (Don’t worry, we dig more into test-optional colleges later on in this chapter). Earning high scores, however, remains a crucial part of your college admission process. There are still state university systems that have minimum score requirements or offer guaranteed acceptance for in-state applicants with scores above a certain threshold. A low test score on an otherwise stellar application will raise red flags for readers, and these scores are often used to determine merit aid eligibility—merit aid will help you pay for college without taking on debt. No matter where you apply, the three most important elements of your college application will be your test scores, your GPA, and the rigor of your high

school transcript (i.e., the courses you chose to take—more on that in Chapter 3!).

Survey Says

What is the toughest part of the college admission process?

40% said taking SAT, ACT, or AP exams

30% said completing applications for admission and financial aid

20% said waiting for the decision letters; choosing which college to attend

10% said researching colleges; choosing schools to apply to

*Results of The Princeton Review's College Hopes & Worries Survey of college applicants and parents of college applicants.

Will colleges see my PSAT scores?

No, PSAT scores are not used in college admissions.

The PSAT is taken by roughly 1.6 million 11th graders each October. Your score will give you some idea of how you'll do on the SAT, which can help you form a clear plan to prep if you don't have one yet. But the PSAT isn't just a practice SAT—it will determine your eligibility for National Merit Scholarships, which can help you pay for college. So you should get comfortable with the PSAT before you take it. I recommend preparing for all your standardized tests during the summer between 10th and 11th grade, before you've taken the PSAT. Why? First, prepping for the SAT and/or ACT in the summer will allow you to focus on your grades during the school year. Second, the best way to prepare for the PSAT is by preparing for the SAT itself. This will help you to use your PSAT score report to identify areas to focus on for the SAT, maximizing your study time. It will also increase your chances of scoring well enough to earn a National Merit Scholarship.

The PSAT isn't just a practice SAT—it will determine your eligibility for National Merit Scholarships.

As of this writing, the PSAT is a pencil-and-paper test. It's *possible* that if high schools are not in session in October 2020 or beyond due to coronavirus, the College Board may develop an online, at-home version of the PSAT like they did for the online iteration of the AP exam held in May 2020. Check the at-home AP question later in this chapter to get a feel for what an online, at-home testing experience could entail.

How is the PSAT used in determining National Merit Scholarships?

Students whose scores put them in the top 99th percentile of 11th grade PSAT takers for their state are recognized as National Merit Semifinalists. Historically, this percentile has included about 16,000 students. These top scorers are invited to submit their high school records, teacher recommendations, and a personal essay; many go on to win \$2,500 merit scholarships while a lucky few are offered larger scholarships by colleges looking to attract students with high scores. Pretty good motivation to try a little practice for the PSAT! Another 34,000 or so students who score well on the test but do not make the 99th score percentile in their states receive official letters of recognition from the National Merit Scholarship Corporation. While official recognition won't help you pay for college, it will help highlight your application inside the admissions office—especially if you follow through and score well on the SAT or ACT.

What does it mean when a college is “test optional”?

Real talk: you can get into college even if you bomb on your standardized tests. You can get into college without ever taking a standardized test, provided you have strong grades in challenging classes and apply to one of the many accredited institutions that are test optional. Simply put, test optional means you get to decide whether you want to send SAT or ACT scores with your application. If you do, they’re likely to be used for admissions decisions (“optional” doesn’t mean “won’t consider”), as well as merit-based financial aid decisions and academic placements.

As I mentioned at the start of this chapter, whether standardized test scores truly help level the admissions playing field for students is debatable. Over the past dozen years, and especially in response to the tectonic testing disruptions caused by COVID, many selective colleges have tweaked their application processes to put less weight on SAT and ACT scores, or have made submitting them entirely optional. For some, this move is temporary. Others have made a permanent shift in their admissions approach. Whatever the reason, what you need to know is that these colleges aren’t just scrambling to support students who were left unable to take an examination. The plan they’ve adapted is one that aligns with preexisting admissions policies that call for a holistic view of applications and underscores the importance of best fit between student and school (because it tells us that schools are looking for something more than the highest grades and scores).

FairTest.org is an excellent resource for students seeking more information about test-optional schools.

Often, applying without test scores requires submission of additional application materials, or meeting a specific GPA requirement. For “text flexible” schools, applying without SAT/ACT scores requires the submission of other kinds of standardized test scores in their place, such as SAT Subject Tests, APs, or an International Baccalaureate exam. In other cases, you can apply for admission without SAT/ACT test scores, but you’ll still need to submit them to be considered for merit-based financial aid. You should

research the admissions policies at your college of choice very carefully. [FairTest.org](https://www.fairtest.org/) is an excellent resource for students seeking more information about test-optional schools.

Should I still take the ACT or SAT during COVID?

I strongly recommend giving at least one test a try, if it's safe for you to do so. Both SAT and ACT are following CDC-recommendations about social distancing at their test centers and are either requiring (SAT) or recommending (ACT) that test-takers wear masks (staff are required to do so). The bottom line is that standardized tests give you opportunities. Due to the ongoing effects of COVID, there may simply be fewer data points overall, depending on your circumstances, for admission teams to evaluate (examples: fewer AP test scores, classes that are now pass/fail and don't count toward your GPA, and limited or cancelled extracurricular activities), so SAT and ACT scores may provide that all-important distinguishing factor for admissions and merit-based aid decisions. Having solid test scores on hand will give you a wider array of options when it comes to colleges, and may be necessary for scholarship applications.

Standardized tests give you opportunities.

What can I do to get into a test-optional school?

The University of Chicago. The University of California system. The University of Texas system. Eight, count 'em, eight Ivies. More and more colleges and universities have gone test-optional as a result of the coronavirus pandemic. Chances are there's at least one test-optional school on your college wishlist. These admission teams still need to get a clear sense of who you are and why you'd be an amazing addition to their campus. In short, my friends, you need to do everything you can to make your application stand out.

We'll go into how to craft your college application in much more detail in Chapter 6, but here's a sneak peek. First up: research. It is critical that you be able to demonstrate to the admissions committee why you're a great fit for that school—and vice versa—and the only way to do so is to know exactly where you'd fit in with pre-existing programs. This is perhaps even more important for schools instituting some form of distance learning, as there will likely be fewer opportunities for you to figure out who you are and what you can contribute once you get there if you're not actually *there*.

So, take virtual campus tours. Follow school spirit hashtags on Twitter. Figure out what sort of programs and activities are being planned and see how you would be able to get involved with them. Search college profiles on [PrincetonReview.com](https://www.princetonreview.com) or grab a copy of one of our guidebooks. Once you figure out what's important to you, you can find schools that align with your goals and values. (I've got more advice on college research if you flip back to Chapter 1.)

Do everything you can to make your application stand out.

Next, you'll want to write game-changing college essays and solicit glowing letters of recommendation. Make the most of this opportunity for the admission committee to hear directly from the source: you! Help them learn more about your character from the teachers, mentors, and coaches who have supported your growth. And finally, let me reiterate that if you can take the

SAT or ACT, prep beforehand so that you can do your level best. If you achieve your score goal...fantastic! You can send your scores to schools* where they may help your application to stand out. If you don't achieve your goals, and your schools are test-optional, they never need to know. (To be clear, I emphatically recommend that you do *not* send low scores. Think about it from the college's point of view. If a school accepts a student who has reported a low score, that will be factored into the school's overall average for admissions requirements, and a school that is only temporarily test-optional may not want to lower that range.)

*One quick note that for both the SAT and ACT, there is a fee to send scores after viewing them, though this fee can be dropped if you're eligible for a fee waiver.

Which test should I choose: SAT or ACT?

I hear some variation of this question a lot! SAT or ACT? Or both? Is neither an option? The vast majority of four-year colleges will accept scores from either test, and do not prefer one over the other, so it's really up to you. Most of the students we work with at The Princeton Review want guidance as to which test will allow them to get the highest score with the least amount of work. The simplest way to answer that question is to take a practice ACT and a practice SAT, including observing the standard time limits, and see how you feel and how you score. There are plenty of free or affordable ways to access practice tests online or in books (including on our website PrincetonReview.com). I typically advise students to take at least one of these exams, even if they're only applying to test-optional schools.

The SAT was redesigned in 2016, so it's a different test than the one your parents remember taking. It's also more similar to the ACT than ever, which makes it much easier to prep for both tests concurrently. You don't have to take *both* the SAT and ACT, but before COVID a steadily increasing number of applicants to competitive colleges were submitting scores from both tests with their applications. That's definitely a trend to watch.

Take note: there are some key differences between the two tests. There's one more reading comprehension passage on the SAT than on the ACT. The ACT uniquely has a Science section, but it tests critical thinking rather than specific science knowledge. The SAT only allows a calculator for some math questions, while the ACT allows a calculator for all math questions. Finally, of course, the score ranges are different. A perfect score on the SAT is 1600. On the ACT, it's 36. While that's all important to know, the best way to figure out which test you'll do better on isn't to weigh all of these factors—it's to jump right in and take a couple of practice tests!

SAT			
Sections			
Writing & Language			
Reading			
Science (Optional)			
Essay (Optional)			
Timed Essay			
3 hours 50 minutes (with Essay)			
3 hours 40 minutes (with Essay)			

Reading Comprehension		
Science section that really tests critical thinking, not the science you learned in school		
Mathematic		
Algebra I & II Geometry, Trigonometry, Data Analysis		
Calculator not allowed on some sections		
Optional (but required by some colleges). The essay prompt is designed to test your verbal comprehension and analyze complex issues.		
Score 600		
Retesting options exam OR a threshold below 3 sections.		

Changes to Retesting Options

Currently, you would need to sit for the entire ACT exam again in order to get another crack at a section for which you didn't perform at your best. However, ACT, Inc. is planning to offer section retesting, which means you can sign up either for the entire ACT exam or for a retest of one, two, or three ACT sections. As this book went to press, this initiative had been postponed so that test-center capacity would be fully available for students looking to take the ACT in its entirety. Still, this change is coming and worthy of your consideration.

Another potential difference to be aware of is whether the SAT or ACT has a computerized option. Both testing bodies have had to change course as they navigate the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, ACT, Inc. has postponed its pre-COVID plans to roll out a digital ACT exam option that would give students a choice between an (in-person) computer-based exam or the current (in-person) pencil-and-paper experience. As of this writing, however, ACT, Inc. was developing a new, remote testing option for late 2020 or early 2021 that would allow students to take the ACT from home or at another safe location. College Board announced in the summer of 2020 that they were putting their plans for a digital, remote-proctored version of the SAT on pause. So, there may come a time when one or both tests are offered online. If that's the case, this is another scenario you can practice for! Just as the College Board released demos and practice environments for the at-home iteration of the AP exam, (more on that coming up), you can rest assured that practice materials will be released in advance of a new, online version of the

SAT or ACT. Again, I say, let the practice tests be your guide.

When should I take the SAT or ACT?

Plan to take your first official sitting of either test as early as you feel comfortable and ready from a test prep perspective. I recommend no later than in the spring of 11th grade. That will leave you with plenty of time to get your scores, and if you want to raise them, plan for any targeted follow-up prep and a second official sitting. After all, there's no way to know if a testing date will have to be canceled due to COVID-19—the sooner you act, the more time you have to react! There's nothing wrong with taking the test a second time, if you didn't get the scores you were hoping for the first time out. If you are happy with your scores, you could consider giving the other test a try, or just check scores off your list and use 12th grade fall to focus on crafting your applications and essays.

Historically, both the SAT and ACT have been given 7 times a year. With COVID-19 related cancellations in 2020, however, both College Board and ACT, Inc. are working to expand the availability of both tests, including with new testing centers, additional ACT test dates, a new SAT administration in September, and a *potential* new SAT test date in January. While I would love to include a test date calendar for you to consult below, these dates may no longer be accurate by the time you get your hands on this book! Check the official College Board and ACT websites to get the latest schedules.

The bottom line: both the SAT and ACT are held multiple times a year and both the College Board and ACT are making serious efforts to ensure you'll be able to take these exams in a safe way. It's possible that centers near you may have fewer seats than usual. Some states may have lower capacity and, in densely populated cities, students may have a harder time finding available seats than in less densely populated places. That's why it's important to register for the test date you're planning on as early as you can.

If I take either test more than once, which scores will colleges see?

Colleges and universities typically choose one of three options when it comes time to evaluate your standardized test scores:

- Consider all scores from all official test dates;
- Consider your highest overall score from a single test date;
- Consider a composite of your highest scores on each section from all the dates you took the test, known as a “superscore.”

Each school will have its policy clearly spelled out on the institution’s website and/or in your application materials. If you aren’t sure which scores a school will evaluate with your application, call and ask. This will inform your test prep and test-taking strategy. It’s also your responsibility to arrange to have the appropriate score reports sent to each college from ACT, Inc. or the College Board for the SAT. It’s possible that you’ll apply to several schools with different test score policies.

All Scores

If you’re applying to any schools that require all your official score reports, you will want to be at the absolute top of your game each time you sit for either the SAT or ACT. Practice, practice, practice on full-length tests with the appropriate time limits as much as possible. Eliminate as many test-day variables as you possibly can: Make sure you know how to get to the test site in advance, have gas in the car and batteries in your calculator, get a good night’s sleep and eat a healthy breakfast. I give this advice to all test takers, but if schools will see all your score reports, you can’t afford any flubs. Fortunately, fewer and fewer schools are taking this intimidating approach to test scores, and if you do experience a standardized test tragedy, you can include a statement explaining the circumstances with your college application.

Highest Overall Score from a Single Test Date

Schools that only consider your highest overall score make the process of requesting score reports very simple, since you’ll only need the one report.

Superscores

Many selective colleges use superscores, which is great for applicants as only your best test performances count on your application. You can calculate your SAT superscore by adding your highest Math section score to your highest Evidence-Based Reading and Writing score. You can calculate your ACT superscore by finding the average of your highest scores on the Math, Science, Reading, and English sections. When you apply to a school with a superscore policy, you will need to identify the test dates on which you received your highest score on each SAT test section (Math and Evidence-Based Reading and Writing) and send in score reports from each of those dates. The admissions office will then calculate your superscore and dismiss the lesser scores. As of September 2020, ACT, Inc. *automatically* calculates your ACT superscore across your various-test taking events, which you can then choose to send to colleges. (That doesn't mean that you *have* to send your superscore or that all colleges will accept it, so do your research.)

The College Board and ACT, Inc. have historically charged a small fee for each score report. Colleges are increasingly accepting self-reported scores on applications—that means you won't have to pay for each official report to be sent to each school where you are applying, but can enter scores on your application yourself. You will still need to send in an official score report to confirm your self-reported scores if you are accepted. The College Board and ACT, Inc. have also introduced more fee-waiver policies that make it easier and cheaper for students to submit official score reports with their applications.

How can I improve my standardized test scores during COVID?

Good scores don't come without putting in the work. Improving your standard test scores boils down to identifying three things: (1) the scores you have; (2) the scores you need; and (3) a plan to close the gap. You might only get one chance to take an official administration of a particular standardized test, which means you'll want to score as well as you can to make the strongest possible case for admissions, merit-based financial aid, and academic placements.

You've heard me rhapsodize at length about the benefits of taking SAT and ACT practice tests, and I want you to know that there are practice tests available for them all. SAT Subject Tests, AP exams, PSAT, IB—make sure that you simulate test day conditions as closely as possible, including time limits, to get your personal, baseline score from the practice test.

Next, let's consider “the scores you need.” For starters, look up the college profile for each of your prospective schools on [PrincetonReview.com](https://princetonreview.com). Go to the Admissions tab on each profile, and check the 25th through 75th percentile SAT and ACT scores of enrolled students. The scores you see toward the higher end of that range are your goals to set—and, ideally, the ones to beat. Remember: You don't have to submit scores to test-optional schools, but if you do choose to submit them, those scores *will* be considered for admission. To help your application and your financial aid prospects, they'll need to be competitive with the scores of accepted, enrolled students at the schools on your list. (More about this a few pages back in “What can I do to get into a test-optional school?”) Scores can be a chance to shine.

As for AP exams, each college on your list will have its own policies about what AP score will translate to college credit, so you're aiming for the highest score possible to give you the most options. Consistently getting a 3 in practice exams shows you there is room to shake up your prep strategy. Some colleges will also grant course credit for excellent performance on the SAT Subject Tests, allowing you to test out of (or into) classes in an area where you excel. (Lots more about SAT Subject Tests coming up.)

To close the gap between the scores you have and the scores colleges require, you'll need a tool kit. I cannot recommend highly enough our own

Princeton Review prep books, online courses (including ones that come with score guarantees), and tutors. But there are tons of options out there. How do you know where you need to improve? Target your prep based on how you do on your practice tests and drill down on the areas, like timing, content, or question types, that presented the greatest challenges for you. Are there patterns? Did you tend to struggle more on algebra questions over the geometry ones? Did you take a hard, convoluted approach when there was an easier, more strategic way to answer the question? Analyzing why you got questions wrong (and right!) will help you pin down what you know and don't know, and what strategies worked and didn't work.

As I mentioned earlier, prepping for standardized tests during COVID can unfortunately mean preparing amid the uncertainty of when you'll be able to sit for the actual test. I always recommend working while you have the availability to focus your time and energy, even if your actual test date is still up in the air due to cancellations, closures, or postponements. Keep up a consistent review schedule and continue to practice about 30 minutes a day to keep your skills sharp. Once you're fully prepared to take a standardized test, the goal is to *stay* prepared.

One more tip for these COVID times: If you'll be taking the SAT or ACT while wearing a mask, then practice while wearing a mask. If any test ends up being administered remotely, like the May 2020 AP exams, then practice in the actual spot where you'll be taking the exam, and speak with your family about any steps you can take to minimize distractions—they may need to practice so that they don't accidentally disturb you during the actual test! If you'll be taking the test at 8:30 a.m., then practice taking the test at 8:30 a.m. Your goal is to make sure there are no surprises or unfamiliar circumstances during the actual exam. COVID has already brought enough uncertainty to the table, so you'll want your test-taking experience to be as natural as possible. Keep practicing, and as you see your performance improve, you can gain confidence knowing that your new skills will serve you well when it counts.

What should I do if my SAT or ACT score wasn't great, and I can't get another testing spot?

Take a deep breath. It's true that testing availability during the COVID-19 pandemic may mean that you only get one chance to take the SAT or ACT. Know that whatever happens, you will be among an entire cohort of students in the same situation—students whose test dates have been cancelled or postponed and who may not have had the opportunity to sit for these tests as many times as they would like. The College Board and ACT, Inc. understand this and college admissions teams will understand this, as well.

Here are a few additional considerations that should ease your mind:

1. **You still might be able to retake the test.** Just as testing bodies are working to secure additional test centers, add more seats to existing centers, and even introduce additional test dates, colleges have been flexible in accommodating shifting deadlines given this global pandemic. For example, we saw a growing number of colleges in the spring of 2020 move their Decision Day deadline from May 1 to June 1. This tells us that should opportunities to complete the requirements of college applications not be available, colleges are very likely either to change the requirements or move the deadline so that students can meet them.
2. **Are the schools on your list test-optional? You've got the leverage in this situation!** The University of California system, for one, has famously removed its SAT/ACT college admission requirement by going test-optional for fall of 2021 and 2022 admission and test-blind for fall of 2023 and 2024. These UC schools are not alone! If you're applying to schools that are test-optional, taking the SAT or ACT doesn't mean you have to report your scores.
3. **You are more than your test score.** SAT/ACT scores are one piece of your college application and don't tell the full story of who you are. Your college essays, teacher recommendations, and extracurriculars all play a role in making you a multi-layered candidate. So do your coding skills, your love for piano, the way you take care of your siblings, late-night chess battles with your dad, and those epic Lego dioramas you create on the dining room table. What interests you outside of the classroom can provide fantastic fodder that will set you apart from

other applicants.

Last, but not least, remember that we're all coping as best we can during a global pandemic. Colleges will have to adjust their expectations with students applying for spots in the September 2021 first-year class and beyond. So, don't give the SAT/ACT tests more or less weight than they deserve. If you are able to schedule another test date due to new college application deadlines, that's great. If not, shift your focus to the other aspects of your application that you *can* control, and take heart.

What are SAT Subject Tests? Which ones should I take, and when?

SAT Subject Tests are one-hour multiple choice tests in specific academic subjects. They used to be called “SAT IIs” back when the main SAT was officially the “SAT I.” Some selective colleges require or, more often, recommend that applicants submit scores from two to three SAT Subject Tests in order to be considered for admission, and most (including test-optional schools) will consider them if you choose to provide them with your application. Most of these schools will leave the subjects up to you, but sometimes admission officers want to see scores from specific tests, like Math Level 2. In some cases, SAT Subject Tests can even be taken *instead of* other standardized tests, which we discussed earlier in regards to schools with “test flexible” admissions policies. If you’re home-schooled, you’re likely to be required to take two or three Subject Tests, as well.

Most schools will leave the subjects up to you, but sometimes admissions officers will want to see scores from specific tests, like Math Level 2.

My rule of thumb: if you don’t have a list of schools where you’ll be applying yet, you should plan to take at least two SAT Subject Tests in subjects that you enjoy and in which you earn good grades. Also, if a school “recommends” a Subject Test, go ahead and chalk it up to a requirement. Your goal is to show colleges that you challenge yourself, and that you’re willing to go above and beyond to achieve success. Following their recommendation guidelines is a great way to do that.

If you *can’t* take an SAT Subject Test due to lack of access to the test due to COVID, colleges will understand that too! At some schools, students can also opt to take the ACT instead of taking a combination of the SAT and SAT Subject Tests. Some schools alternatively allow students to substitute IB or AP exam scores for Subject Test scores. What we’re seeing is a commendable degree of flexibility on the part of colleges. If you write on your application that you want to study Spanish or Italian in college and haven’t taken the relevant Subject Test before applying, admission teams will understand that

you didn't take it because you *couldn't* take it, and they will not penalize you for that *especially* if you're pursuing those subjects in other arenas. If you need more reassurance on that front, this is a great time to flip back to the Introduction where I discuss "Care Counts in Crisis" signed by over 360 admissions leaders.

SAT Subject Tests are offered on most SAT test dates, and not all subjects are available on every test date. (The College Board has expanded both of its SAT and SAT Subject Test date options in light of COVID-19 cancellations so check [CollegeBoard.com](https://collegeboard.com) for the very latest). You can take up to three SAT Subject Tests on a given test day, but you can't take the regular SAT and an SAT Subject Test on the same day (why you'd want to do such a thing, I can't imagine! You'll find my tips for staying sane through the college process in Chapter 8). You will want to spread these tests out over your high school career rather than try to cram them all in junior year when you've started planning for college in earnest. It will also be easier to achieve a high score if you take an SAT Subject Test immediately after you complete the corresponding high school course. For example, if you take biology in 9th grade, take the SAT Subject Test in Biology in May or June of 9th grade.

While SAT Subject Test scores do not carry as much weight as regular SAT scores on your college application, you still want to do well on these tests. You can prep with a book or a tutor, or talk to the teacher you have in a relevant subject. If enough students in your class are planning to take the SAT Subject Test in that subject, your teacher might be willing to lead a couple of extra study sessions outside of class ahead of the test date.

Do I need to take AP exams?

Most colleges and universities do not require Advanced Placement (AP) scores for admission—but they will make your application more competitive. AP courses are college-level classes taught in high school, usually during junior and senior year, and culminate each May/June with subject exams that are scored 1–5. In the pre-COVID-19 era, AP exams were typically a combination of multiple choice and short-answer questions that ran two to three hours. (Some language tests included an audio component.) In May 2020, the AP exam was administered for the first time as an at-home test in a 45-minute, free-response format. More on the at-home AP exam in the next question.

That might sound like a lot of work for a score that isn't absolutely necessary—and only out of 5! But AP courses and exams can give both you and your college application a whole lot of power. AP classes on your high school transcript show admissions officers that you're academically engaged and willing to challenge yourself—that's what I mean when I talk about the rigor of your high school transcript. (For schools that are going test-optional in response to COVID, your ability to demonstrate such engagement will be more important than ever!) You can pursue subjects that you find compelling, and you will develop research and analytical skills that will help you succeed in college. Many colleges give course credits for AP scores of 4 or 5. Starting college with a few academic credits already in your pocket can potentially help you place out of prerequisite classes; it can free up your schedule to pursue an academic minor, an internship, or a part-time job. Several AP credits and careful academic planning can also help you graduate a semester or even a year early, which is one strategy for keeping the overall cost of your degree down. Another consideration: in the age of COVID, being able to potentially get some prerequisite courses out of the way before getting to college is even more valuable, because we don't yet know if the shifts in learning will result in class sizes shrinking, which might result in certain courses being harder to take. Being able to skip a class that your peers have to take would lessen the competition you'd face during registration.

As you chart your course through high school, find out what AP classes are available at your school. There are 38 subject exams, but not every subject is taught at all high schools, and you'll need to know any courses you're required to take before entering an AP course (for example, you may need to

take a couple of years of honors classes in Spanish to enroll in AP Spanish your senior year). This sort of pre-planning has never been more important than during the pandemic, as you may find that your school has reduced class sizes and/or AP offerings. When the time comes to sign-up for APs, you want to be at the front of that list.

That said, while taking challenging courses is essential to building a college-ready high school transcript, overloading your schedule in one semester or year can cause a lot of stress and set up unnecessary obstacles to achieving the best grades possible. Choose AP subjects that interest you and in which you received good grades in introductory level courses. Balance your workload by taking one or two AP classes each semester in 11th and 12th grade, rather than trying to pursue an all-AP, all-the-time schedule.

When you take an AP class, make a plan to prep for the exam by March 1. The course will give you a deep dive into material covered on the test, but as with all standardized tests, you will benefit from getting familiar with the test format. You'll sit for the test in early May or June, so you'll need to schedule time to review class material and work practice questions within accurate time limits (along with all your other homework, extracurriculars, test prep, and down time!). Look at your AP exams as a chance to brag to admissions officers about your knowledge of subjects that excite you.

What should I expect if I need to take an at-home AP exam?

An online, take-at-home version of the AP exam debuted in May 2020 in response to the impact of COVID-19. It's possible that future iterations of the AP exam will be held online as well. If that's the case, then you can likely expect a test experience that resembles the format below. I say, *likely*, because—here comes my refrain—things not only can change, but are changing! The online AP was a last-minute solution to quarantines, and there's no guarantee that the College Board won't use this next year to fine tune things. Double-check the College Board website in the months leading up to your exam for the most up-to-date information.

The best way to avoid being caught off guard is to prepare for everything. (It's also a good way to overprepare if there end up being no changes.) For one, you may experience a shorter test. The at-home APs introduced in May 2020 were 45-minute, free-response tests that students could choose to take on a date in either early May or June. (The College Board's strong recommendation? Prep to take the exam in May. That way if something goes wrong you can use the June date as your fallback). By the way, free-response is the format of most college-level exams, too!

You can also make sure you're good to go by setting up a comfortable at-home testing environment. Students were able to take the online AP exam from any type of device (tablet, laptop/desktop, or smartphone) right from the comfort of home, whether that's at the desk in their bedroom or at the kitchen table. Answers could either be typed and electronically sent or handwritten and then submitted as a digital photo. If you do need to take an at-home AP exam, make sure that wherever you set up shop is quiet and comfortable and that you've configured everything you need—fresh batteries in your calculator! Up-to-date web browser!—in advance of test day. If you're worried about your internet, device, or setup at home, you should reach out to your counselor or directly to College Board.

Another thing to note: the online AP was an open-book, open-note test, meaning you were allowed to have your textbooks and class notes by your side the whole way. The exam was also, as I mentioned earlier, only 45 minutes long. Let me caution you that flipping through your notes is never a good use of your time. The best way to prepare your notes is to know exactly

what you have in advance and to organize it thoughtfully. That way, if you do need to look up a quick formula or fact, it will *literally* be at your fingertips.

Many students find free-response questions to be more difficult than multiple-choice questions. But you can rest easy that the scoring of the at-home AP won't make it harder (or easier) to get a great score. That's because the "cut score"—that is the raw score—needed to get a 3, 4, or 5 will be lower compared to years when the multiple-choice version of the test was given. And remember: it was still possible for you to earn that coveted top score of 5, even if you didn't fully answer an exam question, but you'll want to have shown great progress towards that goal.

The best way to avoid being caught off guard is to prepare for everything.

Luckily, you can (and should!) practice everything beforehand—from timing and the use of your notes or formula sheets to the mechanics of actually uploading and submitting your finished work. Knowing exactly what to expect is a surefire way to feel as comfortable as possible—at home or otherwise—on exam day.

What's an International Baccalaureate (IB) Diploma? How do college admission counselors treat an IB diploma?

The International Baccalaureate Diploma Programme is another high school curriculum option that, like honors or AP classes, gives you opportunities to challenge yourself academically and signal to admissions officers that you're capable of rigorous academic work. It is a specific curriculum and set of assessments completed in the final two years of high school, and it is only available at some U.S. high schools that have been accredited by the International Baccalaureate. It was developed in Switzerland in the 1960s by an international coalition of educators, with the goal of creating a curriculum that prepares students for college-level academics that could be implemented globally. If you're a high school junior and this is the first time you're learning about the International Baccalaureate program, I don't want you to panic over a missed opportunity! Many U.S. high schools do not offer the IB program, but do offer other challenging classes and programs (like AP courses) that will give weight to your transcript. Going for an IB diploma is a decision you want to make with input from your parents and guidance counselor, possibly as early as 8th grade, as you will need to attend a high school that offers the program.

Most admissions professionals rank AP credits and IB credits on a college application equally.

When students and parents ask about IB diplomas and college admissions, they're usually in one of two camps: either they're already pursuing an IB, often overseas, and are worried that U.S. colleges and universities don't recognize its qualifications, or they want to know if AP credits or IB credits are more impressive to admissions officers. I've got good news for everyone: admissions officers at U.S. schools are familiar with the International Baccalaureate and the high level of academic study and performance it entails, and most of the admissions professionals I've met rank AP credits and IB credits on a college application equally. They both reflect a student who pursues academic achievement through the opportunities available—AP classes are more widely available to high school students in the United States

than IB classes. The IB diploma may not be an option at your school, or it might not be the best curriculum for your learning style, but that won't count against you if your transcript includes honors and/or AP courses, or even specialized summer programs.

Some schools award college credits for IB subjects.

If an IB diploma is an option for you, it's a unique opportunity that you should discuss with your high school guidance counselor or a teacher you trust to honestly evaluate your academic potential. Individual colleges and universities have different policies regarding IB credits, but as with APs, some schools award college credits for IB subjects. There are also IB-specific scholarships available at universities worldwide, including almost sixty schools in the United States.

Take note: the end-of-the year IB exams scheduled for May 2020 were canceled to prioritize student and teacher health during the COVID-19 pandemic. IB diplomas were still awarded on schedule even without May exams as IB decided to use a calculation based on past coursework to predict each student's course grade. IB students should double-check with the prospective schools on their list to see if they will accept 2020 scores for college credit.

High School Testing Timeline

Extracurricular activities, school commitments, and other factors play into when and how you're going to prepare for the SAT and ACT. Folks, there's no perfect plan (especially with COVID-19 cancellations and so much up in the air). But here's what I recommend for students going into their junior year.



Summer before junior year: Prep for the SAT and take it in August or October for the first time.



October: Take the PSAT.



November/December: Take the SAT one more time.



February: Start prepping for the ACT and take it for the first time.



April: Take the ACT one more time.



May: Study, and take your AP tests.



June: Sign up for one to three SAT Subject Tests.



Summer before senior year: You can take the SAT or ACT one more time if necessary. If you take a summer test, you'll receive scores in time for Early Action or Early Decision deadlines.





Chapter 3

High School Transcripts

How do I make online learning work for me?

What should I be doing in 9th and 10th grades to prepare for the college admission process?

What should I be doing in 11th and 12th grades to prepare for the college admission process?

How will pass/fail grading affect my admission chances?

Is it better to have a B in an honors/AP course or an A in a regular/easier course?

My school doesn't publish class rank. Will that hurt my application?

What carries more weight on a college application: GPA or test scores?

Which electives should I take?

How do admission counselors view applications from public school students vs. private school students?

How do I address my high school disciplinary record on my application?

CHAPTER 3

High School Transcripts

Colleges care about the classes you take every year until high school graduation. So, should you sign up for AP Calculus and AP Physics the same year? Take it easy early on, and then pile on the challenging work junior year?

The general rule is to take five solid academic subjects a year in English, math, social studies, science, and foreign language. My tips will help you choose the right high school classes each year and understand how your GPA factors into college applications during COVID.

How do I make online learning work for me?

When it comes to online learning, you can do more than just “get by.” You can thrive. You and your high school teachers may have switched over to online learning in a hurry in the spring of 2020. Now, as high schools and colleges make decisions about whether—and how—to reopen for in-person classes, you may still have some classes that you take online—or take at least partially online. You may also be applying to colleges that are fully in-person, fully online (for now), or that have transitioned to a hybrid model. Even if you’re going to high school in person right now, you’re likely needing to make greater use of online forms of communication, since socially distanced in-person interactions present challenges of their own.

Before we jump into class schedules and GPA, let’s look at all the ways you can capitalize on the advantages of online instruction so that it benefits you.

1. **Stay organized.** It’s more important than ever to put every single class and every single assignment into one big calendar. Staying on top of all your assignments is key as you’re not likely to get the same usual reminders, like your classmates chatting about an upcoming problem set on the way to class, that you’d get in an ordinary semester.

2. **Treat your online classes with as much seriousness as you would your in-person classes.** Make sure you attend class. (This is especially true if you have any lectures that are asynchronous, meaning pre-recorded and posted online so you can watch anytime.) Arrive on time. Take notes. If the lesson is happening in real time, ask questions. Engage with the material. If class is asynchronous, put time in your schedule to regularly do the classwork, just as you would in a live, synchronous class. The habits you cultivate now will serve you well in your future educational and professional life.
3. **Automatically add any virtual office hours for your instructors to your calendar.** Virtual office hours are a time period you can “drop in” online and ask your teacher questions about the lesson, get extra help when you’re stuck, or review how you’re performing in the course. If your instructors are making virtual office hours available, make a habit of going regularly. Because you aren’t having as much face-to-face interaction these days, you’ll want to ensure, first, that your instructors know you and know that you’re a serious learner, and second, that you’re understanding the material as you go along. Problems are much easier to address when you catch them early!
4. **Try to replicate the support systems you’d have under ordinary circumstances.** We’ve already talked about showing up to office hours. You can also email your instructor if you have questions. Beyond that, make sure that you are an engaged member of your class community. Create or join smaller virtual study groups. Set up online meetings to talk about the material and test each other. Keep your peer-to-peer connections strong. A huge part of your educational experience will be the relationships you cultivate with your classmates.
5. **Get into “work mode.”** Folks, it’s both a physical state of being and a state of mind. Set up your desk, or wherever you’ll attend classes and do schoolwork, like a workstation. All the better if your workstation is in a room with a door that closes! Get dressed in the clothes you would wear if you were taking the same class at your physical high school. All of these tricks help you send signals to yourself that school—including online school—is a serious enterprise. Those cues can help you create the educational rhythms you’ve become accustomed to and that will help you succeed.

What should I be doing in the 9th and 10th grades to prepare for the college admission process?

I love it when folks are ready to start thinking about the college admission process early! Planning ahead won't just set you up to succeed, it can also help make the process a lot less stressful. If you're reading this book in 9th or 10th grade, you are already ahead of the game.

First and foremost, aim for academic awesomeness for all four years of high school. Great grades in college prep courses are a key part of your college application and scholarship dollars for school. Simply put, that means you should put in the time and effort your schoolwork requires. Create study habits that work with your learning style and schedule. Tackle assignments that seem particularly challenging head on. That might mean that on a typical Tuesday night, you do the homework for your least favorite subject first and save your favorite subject for last. Or it might mean starting a project like an essay on Shakespeare or a science experiment early, so that you have time to ask for any help you might need and revise your work. Use these early years to identify the academic areas in which you need extra time and support, and you can set yourself up for success down the road. I know that high school is not always simple, though, and later in this chapter I share some advice on what you can do if you find that your best efforts are not adding up to a 4.0 grade point average.

When it comes to choosing classes, think of your freshman year as the foundation of your high school experience. Set long-term goals for high school and break down the tasks you will need to complete and the decisions you will need to make to achieve those goals. For example, consider the course subjects you enjoy and in which you excel. Are there opportunities to take advanced-level classes in those subjects in your junior and senior years? If so, find out what prerequisite courses or grades you need in order to earn a seat in those classes.

Your first two years of high school is also a good time to try out electives and extracurricular activities. Challenging yourself academically and earning good grades are important and will show any admission committee that you are achievement-driven and willing to work hard; pursuing interests outside of your required courses will show them that you are intellectually curious and eager to engage with your community. This is vital information for admission

at competitive schools, where officers look for the energy and unique traits you will bring to campus, as well as academic excellence! I dig into electives later in this chapter, but I urge you to choose subjects that excite you, not what you think will impress an admission officer. Enthusiastic authenticity is impressive!

During your sophomore year, you may want to start some initial college research. If you have older siblings who are visiting college campuses, tag along! Browse online message boards, university websites and social media accounts, and pick up an annual guide like my *Best Colleges* book. Begin to imagine yourself on a college campus. What facilities and qualities will make you feel at home? Preliminary research can help you be efficient when you refine your list of target schools later on.

Finally, a note about standardized tests. You may want to consider taking SAT Subject Tests as early as the end of 9th grade, depending on the subjects you are taking (for example, if you are required to take biology during your freshman year, take the SAT Subject Test in Biology in June of that year). You will have other opportunities to take these tests in 10th and 11th grade, and you won't know which subjects (if any) you will need for your college application until you know where you plan to apply. But knocking out a few SAT Subject Tests now (timed to when your class in that discipline is still fresh in your noggin) can give you more flexibility and decrease stress later on!

You *don't* need to start prepping for the SAT or ACT in 9th grade. Of course, if you like practice, it won't hurt, but if you experience test anxiety, it may be a distraction from focusing on your grades. If you do want to get a jump on your prep for these tests, I recommend taking a couple of practice exams during sophomore year, to get a sense of the differences between the ACT and SAT (see Chapter 2). If earning National Merit Scholar status is important to you, plan to prep for the PSAT during the summer between sophomore and junior year. You will take the PSAT in October of your junior year.

College-Bound: Freshman & Sophomore Year Checklist

Freshman Year



Focus on your grades so you can earn placement for more rigorous courses.



Practice your study skills, identify support resources available, and ask for help if you need it.



Get to know your school and community! Explore clubs, sports, volunteer opportunities, and more.



Take any appropriate SAT Subject Tests.

Sophomore Year



Continue to challenge yourself academically.



Develop constructive relationships with your teachers.



Get to know your school counselor.



Commit to the activities that you really enjoy, and try to take on more responsibility.



Take any appropriate SAT Subject Tests.

Summer Before Junior Year



This is the perfect time to prep for the SAT and ACT.



Begin your college research.

What should I be doing in 11th and 12th grades to prepare for the college admission process?

Hopefully, you're not surprised to hear that these years are absolutely crucial for your college application! Junior and senior year of high school, you want to take tough courses, get great grades, prep for your standardized tests, choose schools to which you want to apply, and demonstrate leadership in your extracurricular activities. Still, colleges will understand that your junior and/or senior years have been majorly disrupted by the pandemic. Your job is to take care of yourself, manage your time well, and make sure you're taking advantage of opportunities when they are available to you.

Put key dates in your calendar at the beginning of the school year to help stay on track:

Junior year

- Standardized test dates—confirm your local dates for each test:
 - ☐ PSAT (October)
 - ☐ AP exams (May)
 - ☐ SAT Subject tests (June)
 - ☐ SAT (varies)
 - ☐ ACT (varies)
- Midterms, finals, and any other major exam or project deadline dates that your teachers give you at the start of each term
- Webinars, virtual information sessions, and other online or in-person opportunities to meet with representatives from the colleges you are considering (spring)
- Long weekends when you might want to plan to visit colleges, if safe to do so. Schedule time for virtual college tours, too! (spring)

Senior year

- Standardized test dates:
 - ☐ Fall of senior year is your last chance to take or retake the SAT or ACT.

- Make sure you leave enough time to get your scores back before submitting your applications!
 - AP exams (May). While you will most likely have committed to a college by the time these exams roll around, some universities will give college credit for a score of 4 or 5, which can help you fill language requirements, skip prerequisites for more advanced courses, and even save a little money if tuition is charged by credit rather than by semester.
- Deadlines for the colleges and universities where you'll be submitting applications—especially if you're applying early!
 - Financial aid deadlines. The Free Application for Federal Student Aid, or FAFSA, is available on October 1st each year, and I always recommend getting that in as early as possible.
 - Midterms, finals, and any other major exam or project deadline dates that your teachers give you at the start of each term; your fall grades will be super important to the admission committee.
 - College interviews

You'll have plenty of other deadlines and appointments to keep as you get into each year—setting up the major guideposts early will save you a lot of angst.

Your grades should be your first priority throughout junior year. Even if you faced some struggles or missteps in your first two years of high school, buckling down junior year can make a big difference. An upward trend in your grades will show admission officers that you've matured and can overcome challenges. Colleges hold a similar worldview if your junior/senior year grades experienced a *drop* due to COVID. Many schools will overlook a grade's decline for the semesters disrupted by COVID, especially when previous semesters (and future ones!) show a student's consistent performance at a high level. If hard work and dedication aren't earning you the grades you want, ask your teacher if they can meet with you outside of class to review difficult material, form a study group, or find a tutor (your school may offer free tutoring programs, or look online for affordable options). Your teachers and high school counselors want you to succeed, so don't be afraid to ask for help if you need it.

You'll most likely be taking the PSAT in October of your junior year. Your score report won't be shared with any colleges, but it will give you a clear idea of how your scores compare to everyone else who took the same test and areas where you want to improve. The PSAT is also used to qualify for the National Merit Scholarship Program, which is a good reason to get some practice in before you officially take the test. National Merit Scholarship

Finalist or Semi-finalist status is a great achievement to include on your application, and you may earn some scholarship dough in the process.

Junior spring is the perfect time to begin researching colleges—just don't lose your focus on your schoolwork while you plan for your future! Revisit Chapter 1 for my advice on college research and campus visits—both virtual and in-person.

By the summer before senior year, you're ready for the nitty-gritty test prep plans I cover in Chapter 2. Senior fall is your last chance to nail the SAT or ACT, which makes the summer before an excellent time to take a prep course and seek out extra practice on the sections of the test that you find most difficult.

Grades remain important—most colleges request copies of your final high school transcript, even if you've already been accepted. That said, senior spring is a great time to take a lighter course load and really enjoy your electives.

Keep your nose to the grindstone in the fall of your senior year—even if your GPA kicks butt and you can check standardized tests off your to-do list, you'll need time to complete your applications and proofread them thoroughly. I break down each part of the application in Chapter 6, but the best advice for applications can't be repeated enough! Start early, do a little bit at a time, and proofread, proofread, proofread!

How to Get Better Grades

One bad test, month, or quarter doesn't have to sink your GPA. You can still end up where you want to be—if you take action now!

1. **Think of class like an opportunity to study.** Take great notes, pay attention, and ask questions. That in-class study time sure adds up!
2. **Start studying before you need to.** For big assignments, start small. Stay motivated by completing a small piece of the project every few days.
3. **Get rid of homework distractions.** Even a 3-second interruption (like the time it takes to glance down at your buzzing phone) has the power to derail the task you're working on.
4. **Use your old tests and quizzes to help you study.** It's also a good idea to look over your notes every night to make sure that you've got it.

5. **Ask for help when you need it.** Students who are willing to ask for a little help impress teachers, counselors, and colleges alike. Chat with your teachers during office-hours, learn about any academic resources your school offers, or try a tutor.
6. **If you can teach it, you know it.** Get to the point that you're comfortable enough with the material that you can teach it to someone else.

College-Bound: Junior & Senior Year Checklist

Junior Year

- ☐ Take the SAT and ACT when you're ready.
- ☐ Balance schoolwork and outside-school interests.
- ☐ Take the most challenging courses available to you.
- ☐ Take the PSAT/NMSQT in October to qualify for a National Merit Scholarship and other scholarship opportunities.
- ☐ Start gathering teacher recommendations.
- ☐ Narrow your college list and make virtual campus visits.
- ☐ Make a plan to prepare for AP exams in May and SAT Subject Tests in June.
- ☐ Learn about financial aid and available scholarships.

Summer Before Senior Year

- ☐ Start working on your application and prewriting college essays—they take longer than you think!
- ☐ Make a calendar of all your application deadlines so you can stay on track.
- ☐

If possible, consider visiting colleges that are on the top of your target list.



If you are applying for Early Decision, you should take the SAT or ACT no later than September.

Senior Fall



Apply early if you're a strong candidate.



Wrap up your applications and stay on top of deadlines for apps, scholarships, and financial aid.



Don't get senioritis! Senior grades matter—your first term grades will definitely be used in the admissions process.



Complete your last SAT/ACT by December at the latest.

Senior Spring



If you still have AP exams to take, study!



Send thank-you notes to your recommenders.



Get ready to celebrate! Spring is all about acceptance letters rolling in.



Talk to friends, family, and counselors before making your final choice.



Once you decide, don't look back! Read through your college's course catalog, and look forward to the next four years.

How will pass/fail grading affect my admission chances?

Many high schools are going pass/fail or implementing brand new grading systems in response to COVID-19. The idea behind going pass/fail is that it can lessen a student's anxiety about performance during this time of disruption when that student may be dealing with family illness, taking online classes, or doing their homework in a less-than-optimal study space. But, not all high schools used the same evaluation process pre-COVID, either! Some schools measure GPA out of 5.0 or 12.0, for some schools AP and honors are the same courses, and some students get written reports instead of letter grades. So, how will you compare to applicants from "regular" schools?

Colleges recognize that not all high schools use the same evaluation process. High school administrators and faculty, too, recognize that the quirks of their curriculum may need to be translated to college admission offices. Particularly for different GPA scales or grading systems, your high school probably has an alternative GPA formula in place, or in the case of non-letter grades, a formal statement explaining how students demonstrate they meet academic benchmarks. Your high school guidance counselor, or a teacher with experience writing recommendations, should be in a position to explain to you how any questions or discrepancies have been addressed by past applicants.

As for COVID-related changes to grading, colleges get it! Here's what Boston University wants prospective students to know about grades: "We understand that high schools have adopted a wide variety of policies around academic assessment and we plan to be flexible and to honor whatever decisions your school has made about grading and course requirements. Please rest assured that you will not be disadvantaged during the admissions process."⁴ As another example, Union College in Schenectady, New York urges students to see these changes in grading policies as an opportunity. "This can help turn attention to some of the other things that you have done during high school, of which you are particularly proud."⁵

"Please rest assured that you will not be disadvantaged during the admissions process."

One thing to note: Pass/fail courses do not factor into your GPA. So, if your high school went pass/fail for part of the year and is now going back to a 4.0 grade point system, you'll want to do your level-best in those courses.

Is it better to have a B in an honors/AP course or an A in a regular/easier course?

This question is a favorite among parents! I can understand why. Most likely, you know the average test scores and GPA of the most recent incoming class at your dream school (this is information schools publish each year and report to many publishers of college rankings). But those averages don't offer much insight into the courses in which accepted students earned those grades.

I know that reducing college admission to a handful of statistics is appealing. It seems to remove the mystery from the process—but I've mentioned that most admission officers tell me that they read applications holistically. That means they don't just look at a student's stats, they look at a full secondary school transcript, including grade trends over time and the difficulty of a student's classes (alongside all of your other application materials, of course!). When The Princeton Review collected school information for our book *The Best 386 Colleges*, nearly 90 percent of those schools reported that both an applicant's GPA and the rigor of his or her high school transcript are very important factors in their admissions decisions.

My advice: Take the most challenging courses available to you, and work hard to earn solid grades. It will show admission committees that you are intellectually curious, up for a challenge, and willing to work hard.

All that said, I know that at the same time you're studying for those awesome grades, you're probably also preparing for standardized tests, participating in extracurricular activities, perhaps captaining a varsity team or working an after-school job, plus finding time to spend with your family and friends. It's important to avoid burning out—take it from me, stress is not a key ingredient for success! Make sure that you take some down time each week, and ask for the help you need from teachers, advisors, parents, and tutors. I want you to challenge yourself, not torture yourself!

My school doesn't publish class rank. Will that hurt my application?

I've got good news for you here! Lots of high schools are ditching class rank, and in response, many colleges and universities are making adjustments to the way they view admission factors. While class rank may help provide useful context for your high school transcript to admission officers, it doesn't really fit in with the holistic application review process that most counselors describe. You're not just a number, you're an individual with a unique set of personality traits and experiences to contribute to a campus community. The folks in admissions departments know that, and many of them will look at your application that way.

One important note about class rank: If you are applying to a school within a state university system, I strongly encourage you to double-check the specific school's admission practices. Class rank remains an important factor in Texas, for example, where state law offers eligible students in the top 10 percent of their high school class automatic admission to schools in the state university system.⁶ Typically, these systems have policies in place for evaluating applicants from high schools that do not publish class rank.

What carries more weight on a college application: GPA or test scores?

Your GPA and the rigor of your high school courses are without a doubt the most important factors on your application—but test scores run a close third. Over 70 percent of the colleges and universities we survey for *Best Colleges* report that standardized test scores are “important” or “very important” in their evaluation of applicants.

What does that mean for you? Practice and prep! Taking a free practice SAT or ACT will help you figure out which test is best for you and help you identify the areas in which you might want to put in a little extra effort to get the score you want. You can find the average standardized test scores of the most recently admitted class at your dream schools online, which will help you set your goal score.

Build time into your schedule to prepare for whichever test you choose, and find prep tools that fit your needs and schedule. There are many, many test prep options available to suit a wide range of learning styles, and student schedules, at a variety of prices. I’m a longtime test prep teacher for The Princeton Review. There are over 4,000 teachers and tutors here! Whether it’s a book, online/classroom course or one-on-one tutoring, choose the option that’s best for you. Your high school or public library may offer free or discounted resources, and your high school counselor can offer recommendations, as well.

As I mentioned in Chapter 2, some schools are test optional, which means they will consider your test scores if you submit them, but your scores are not required for you to be considered for admission. If your first choice college is test optional, you may still want to consider preparing for and taking the SAT or ACT—these scores are often important when you’re applying for scholarships.

Which electives should I take?

I've been telling you what you should and need and might want to do to craft a competitive college application for pages and pages now, but here I'm going to stop. Take whatever electives look interesting to you. Electives give you opportunities to explore new subjects and skills, and having a clear sense of your strengths and weaknesses will help you succeed in college and your career. If you're invested in the subject at hand, it will be less stressful to earn good grades in that subject. Your academic grades will receive closer scrutiny inside college admission offices than your elective grades, but obviously they will still factor into your overall GPA.

My one recommendation when choosing electives is that you stick with at least one or two subjects for more than one semester—chances are, electives are offered at introductory and more advanced levels at your high school. Sticking with a subject through ascending levels will show admissions officers that you're capable of making an authentic commitment and that you actively pursue subjects that you are interested in.

That doesn't mean that you're committed for four years to all the electives you choose in 9th grade. Taking a variety of introductory electives will expose you to new interests and talents, whether you prefer studio art or software development or journalism. Then move on to intermediate and advanced courses in the elective subjects that you most enjoy. If you are facing a particularly challenging semester with a heavy academic course load and preparing for standardized tests on the horizon, you might consider a less intensive elective during that time. Time management is essential to maintain good grades.

How do admission counselors view applications from public school students vs. private school students?

All colleges accept and enroll students from both public and private schools every year.

School	First-year students enrolled in fall 2019 from public high schools*
Boston University	61%
George Washington University	40%
Harvard College	59%
Ohio State University	34% Columbus
Stanford University	61%
Syracuse University	61%
University of Arizona	38%
University of California	41% Los Angeles
University of Colorado	36% Boulder
University of Pennsylvania	50%
University of Virginia	38%

**Data reported to The Princeton Review by the school from fall 2019 through spring 2020*

Admissions officers understand that the range of resources on offer to students varies wildly from one high school to the next, whether you attend a public high school in suburban Texas, a charter school in downtown Chicago, a boarding school in Connecticut, or you’re homeschooled in Oregon. Part of the work of college admissions, recruitment, and enrollment includes evaluating an application in the context of the student’s academic environment. It’s up to you, the applicant, to take advantage of the opportunities at hand, both for your own enrichment and to help you represent your best self on your college applications.

Private high schools do typically offer a rich variety of academics, electives, and extracurricular activities; and favorable student-teacher and student-counselor ratios. For students, that means many options for experiences and accomplishments that will make for strong college applications, and lots of institutional support for pursuing those opportunities and crafting those applications. If this sounds like your high school experience, count yourself lucky.

If you attend a public high school, you're in the vast majority of college applicants, and you have many different paths to college acceptance regardless of the resources immediately available in your school. Admissions officers are not looking for a laundry list of achievements any more than they're looking for a set of sterile statistics. They're looking at how all the elements of an application come together to show the maturity, self-reliance, and character of the student behind the application.

How do I address my high school disciplinary record on my application?

If you have any significant disciplinary or legal issues on your high school record—think suspension, not detention—you should acknowledge it in your college application. Transparency here will show that you are responsible and mature, and if you try to hide past infractions from admissions officers only to have them turn up on your high school transcript, you’re only doing yourself a disservice.

Avoid making excuses or sounding defensive, and focus on what has changed since that incident.

You will most likely have an opportunity to explain yourself in writing within your primary essay or any supporting questions on the school’s application, or you may choose to speak to it in your college interview (or both). Avoid making excuses or sounding defensive, and focus on what has changed since that incident. How have you grown? What did you learn from the experience? (Spoiler: “I learned not to get caught” is not a strong message to go with here.) Don’t think of any blemishes on your record as liabilities—look at them as opportunities to show your maturity and capacity for learning from mistakes.

Whether you plan to write or speak about any issues in your past, you will need a few practice rounds. You should get feedback from someone you trust on any college essay—I go into more depth on admission essays in Chapter 6—but I strongly recommend working with your guidance counselor on the best context for disciplinary issues on your application. Write a couple of drafts, and go over talking points with your counselor to get prepped for your admissions interview (even if interviews are optional for admission to your dream school, this is a case where making a personal connection can really help you). In exceptional cases, a college might contact your school for more details, so you want to be sure that you and your counselor are aligned on the circumstances and outcome of any disciplinary action. This advice also applies if you want to address inconsistent grades.

4. <https://www.bu.edu/admissions/covid-19-faqs/>
5. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/brennanbarnard/2020/05/07/we-get-it-college-admission-deans-speak-out>
6. <https://admissions.utexas.edu/apply/decisions>



Chapter 4

Extracurricular Activities

How do college admission officers view extracurricular activities within an application?

What should I do if my extracurricular activities were canceled?

Does having a job carry as much weight as school-related extracurricular activities?

What sort of jobs/extracurriculars can I do during a pandemic?

How will student athletes be impacted by COVID-19 admissions changes?

What about “grit”?

CHAPTER 4

Extracurricular Activities

I know you want to impress colleges with your accomplishments in the classroom, but your academics aren't the full picture of who you really are. Yes, colleges want bright students. But even more, they want bright, well-rounded students. That's where your extracurricular activities come in. Admissions officers are looking to create a class made up of students with diverse interests and backgrounds. They'll look closely at your extracurriculars to get a sense of the person you are and what you care about.

Of course, just like in-person classes, many extracurricular activities have been canceled across the country out of necessary health and safety precautions—which colleges understand! This chapter digs into how admission officers evaluate extracurriculars within an application and what's changed during COVID.

How do college admission officers view extracurricular activities within an application?

The core of your college application is comprised of your GPA, your standardized test scores, and your high school transcript. Taken together, these two statistics and one list of courses convey your capacity for seeking out and conquering academic challenges. But they don't say very much about your personality or non-academic interests (though this may come through in your choice of electives, depending on what is available at your high school). That's what admissions officers look for in your list of extracurricular activities. You want that list to show that you are engaged with the world outside the classroom, and that you are able to articulate how you spend your time.

Find and commit to the extracurricular activities that you find meaningful.

Extracurricular activities on your college application include any school-affiliated, non-academic activity, like sports, clubs, or performances. You can also include any organized activities you do outside of school, like music lessons, community service, or participating in a youth group. Seasonal and part-time jobs count, too. Your list of activities may show that you're well rounded and have a range of interests. Admissions officers will also be looking for consistency and leadership. If you can keep at least one activity, sport, or job from 10th grade through graduation, you'll show that you are committed to the pursuits and people that are important to you. Taking a leadership position or otherwise demonstrating that your responsibilities progressively increased over the course of your job or involvement with an activity or community is one of the best things you can do to show maturity and accountability on your college application.

So, what extracurriculars do colleges view most favorably? I suspect that you'd have a hard time getting a single list of "ideal" college activities from any college admission officer—imagine how boring the world would be if everyone who attended college did exactly the same extracurricular activities! Plus, if you force yourself to pursue something you don't genuinely enjoy, you're less likely to stick with it, to take on additional responsibilities pertaining to it, or write a compelling college essay about it. The first rule of choosing an extracurricular that a college will view favorably is that YOU view it favorably.

Find and commit to the extracurricular activities that you find meaningful, and look at your extracurricular list like an admissions officer would once you're crafting your application. Maybe your primary extracurricular activity began with school requirements, like sports or community service, and led to more significant, long-term participation. Describing how you went from obligated to excited about a particular activity is a great story for a short application essay (when required) or an admissions interview. If the sport or activity that inspires you isn't offered at your school, you can seek out external resources, like community center classes or club sports. Taking this initiative will provide you with examples of your independence, ambition, and time management skills.

Setting yourself up for a strong college application does take some planning, but it's best to begin with what matters to you, not to a theoretical future admissions panel. By staying engaged with academics and extracurriculars, you're providing yourself with opportunities for personal growth and self-awareness—qualities that appeal to colleges.

What should I do if my extracurricular activities were canceled?

Let me reiterate that stress and personal demands as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic (and, wow, you are not alone!) may mean that you are *not in a position* to contribute to your community through clubs, volunteer work, or a job during this time. And that's okay! The "Care Counts in Crisis" statement, signed by over 360 college deans in the summer of 2020, specifically addresses this: "No student will be disadvantaged during this time who is not in a position to provide these contributions." Extracurricular activities were canceled? You will not be penalized.

But here's what you *can* do.

You can continue practicing the violin even if the school orchestra is temporarily on pause. You can keep practicing your lay-up on a backyard basketball hoop even if you're not playing in any official games. You can keep working on your poetry even if your school isn't putting out the Lit Journal this year. Do what you can to keep your skills sharp. Find ways to further your passions on your own initiative, apart from a school-sanctioned setting. The admission office at MIT puts it this way: "We are far more interested in what your choice of activities—whether or not they happened as planned—tell us about your match with MIT."⁷

Consider it from an admission counselor's perspective. Playing on your high school basketball team conveys more than your love for the game, the way you write for your school newspaper conveys more than your passion for the written word, and even the way you hold down a regular babysitting gig conveys more than your interest in earning money. Playing a sport shows that you understand strategic thinking, determination, and healthy competition. Pursuing a creative, intellectual, or technical project shows that you're curious and motivated. Maintaining a part-time job demonstrates responsibility, a sense of professionalism, and entrepreneurial motivation. Any combination of these qualities makes for a competitive college applicant—and a contributing campus citizen.

I'll end with (more) wise words from the good folks at MIT, "We certainly understand (and empathize with) students who are disappointed that their activities have been disrupted by the pandemic. However, we also want to

make sure that you understand there is no formula for being admitted to MIT: no magic set of clubs, sports, leadership roles, activities, or accomplishments that, of their own, get you in or keep you out.” The thing with uncharted territory? There is no trodden path. Admissions officers are looking for students who can make a new way.

Straight from the Admissions Office

“We know what you had planned. We know what you already participated in and what you have accomplished. We’ll do what we do every year—we’ll make assumptions and inferences, which always (and I use that word intentionally) lean toward benefiting you.”⁸

—Rick Clark, Director of Undergraduate
Admissions at Georgia Tech

10 Smart Summer Activities During COVID

1. **Sharpen your (online) study skills.** You want to start the year off strong in the fall—whether you’re in school physically or continuing to learn remotely.
2. **Take an online class.** Show colleges your ability to adapt and take advantage of the options you have available to you, even during difficult times.
3. **Work on your college essays.** Inspiration is important, but there’s no substitute for time. Start early, sit with it, rework it, and sit with it some more.
4. **Get a job.** Your work history demonstrates your initiative and responsibility, which impress colleges, and there are a number of places that offer online job opportunities.
5. **Create your own project.** Turn your interests and talents into a summer-long project such as practicing creative writing and submitting your work to journals that publish the work of high school students.
6. **Become an entrepreneur.** Start a business with friends that offers a service to your community.
7. **Volunteer locally.** Commit to volunteering for a few hours a week from now through your senior year.
8. **Find a research opportunity.** Use a platform like Zooniverse to contribute to scientific research or transcribe historical documents.
9. **Start your test prep.** Keep your brain in tip-top shape by

picking up a prep book, taking an online course, or finding a tutor to help you manage your time.

10. **Make virtual college visits.** Demonstrate interest for the schools on your list by going on virtual campus tours from the comfort of your own couch.

Does having a job carry as much weight as school-related extracurricular activities?

Absolutely! On a college application, an after-school job conveys that you are responsible and rise to challenges. Your classes and grades should always come first, and if you're considering applying for a job while in high school, you should feel comfortable with the amount of time and flexibility you have for your homework. If an employer is willing to ask a high school student to sacrifice school or study time for work, they probably shouldn't hire high school students. If you're already managing a challenging school/work schedule, you've taken on a great deal of responsibility, and I'd encourage you to address any time management issues with your high school guidance counselor.

Working part-time while in high school might sometimes feel like you're missing out on both extracurricular opportunities and fun, but it's incredibly valuable for your future—in college and beyond. It might not always feel like much when you're stacking boxes or serving coffee, but each work experience leads to the next, so congratulations on entering the working world a little ahead of your peers. No matter what you do for work, there's a way to frame it strategically on your college application. For your essays and interviews, cherry-pick examples from your work experience to demonstrate that you are accountable to yourself and others, capable of constructive collaboration, and have developed your communication skills. Highlight moments of accomplishment and take pride in your work (even if you'd rather be playing video games during most of your shift).

If you hold a job in high school due to financial necessity, don't be afraid to make that clear on your application. Your experience can help you demonstrate how you handle obstacles, course-correct when work or schedules don't go as planned, and accept responsibility. Admissions officers know as well as you do that tuition is expensive, so working to earn money for tuition shows them how motivated you are to pursue higher education.

What sort of jobs/extracurriculars can I do during a pandemic?

I have good news for you. More than a few remote work and extracurricular opportunities have cropped up during this time that you can take part in from home. As always, you'll have to follow the guidelines where you live, and of course be true to your comfort level and that of your parents, as well. Don't be afraid to be creative with your extracurricular choices! Not only will a little out-of-the-box thinking serve you well on college applications, but it will help you stave off boredom if social distancing is keeping you at home. Let's jump in, starting with volunteer work:

Volunteer Experience

First stop: check out Zooniverse, an online portal of important, interesting science research projects—all looking for volunteers. The nice thing about Zooniverse is that you don't need any specialized training or background to participate, and the work you do has real-world impact across many fields. If you volunteer for the “Penguin Watch” project, for example, you'll examine aerial photos of penguins from remote areas and help researchers understand why penguin populations in some regions are in decline.

Here are a few more great sites for engaging in service that helps others:

- All for Good
- American Red Cross
- Catchafire
- Crisis Text Line
- Points of Light
- Project Gutenberg
- Smithsonian Transcription Center
- Translators without Borders
- United Nations Volunteers
- World Family Children Foundation

Jobs

If you're looking for a paid gig you can do online, there are a number of places that offer opportunities. Working in customer service, for example, can often be done from home (some companies will hire you even if you're under 18). You may even be able to tutor or entertain kids online. You could help teach kids a sport, especially one that doesn't require close contact, like tennis. If you're artistic or musically-inclined, you could give lessons over video chat.

In fact, the sky's the limit when it comes to flexing your entrepreneurial skills. Starting your own business (or engaging with existing online e-commerce platforms for crafts and services) can showcase your talents and your initiative. Sites like Etsy and CafePress are great ways to earn money by creating art or graphic designs and selling them to others. Service-based sites like Fiverr and Upwork can help you match your skills (from coding and copywriting to data entry and design) to a range of projects or one-off professional opportunities. You could also consider letting folks in your community know that you're available to assemble furniture, mow lawns or garden, take photos, make calls (personal-assistant work), or do any number of hands-on activities that usually don't require close contact with other people.

More Ideas for Extracurriculars

As for extracurriculars, some are more conducive than others to physical distancing. Plus, you may need to take a more “self-guided” approach.

- If you're an athlete, you may not be practicing as a team right now, but you can still do solo drills so that you keep those skills sharp.
- If you're a musician, you're probably not doing chamber or orchestral music as a group right now, but you can still practice every day, take online music lessons, and even perform on Facebook Live.
- If you're a writer, you can write from, well, anywhere, and submit your work to journals that publish high school students.
- If you're a future Broadway actor, you can rehearse even when you're not performing on an actual stage. (If the *Hamilton* cast can make a performance work on Zoom, why not you?)
- If you're an artist, you can still meet online with the Art Club to share and critique work for your portfolio (turn to Chapter Six where I discuss optional or supplementary college application material) or

organize a delivery of illustrations and photography to brighten up your local hospital.

- If you're a literature-lover, you can start or join a virtual book club.
- No more Spanish Club? You can take part in an online conversation exchange that pairs you with a native Spanish speaker who is studying English. Spend 10 minutes chatting in one language and then switch to the other.
- You can also try something brand new, like learning to code with a community like Code Academy or taking an online course through Coursera or Edx.

The point I want to make here, folks, is that while both your age and our current pandemic moment are limitations, you still have plenty of opportunities to sharpen your skills, gain meaningful service and volunteer experience, and earn some money.

How will student athletes be impacted by COVID-19 admissions changes?

Student-athletes, you will need to be more proactive than ever. You may have had one or more seasons of your sport cancelled, which can mean loss of playing time and fewer opportunities to impress college coaches. (College coaches, by the way, may not be going on their typical in-person recruiting trips, either.)

Things you can do? Stay fit mentally and physically. Film your workouts and make your own skills reel to complement the game tapes that you do have. Keep your grades up, and prioritize prep for the SAT/ACT. While many colleges have gone test-optional (as we discussed in Chapter 3), student-athletes will still likely have to meet academic eligibility criteria to play a sport in college, which normally includes hitting a minimum SAT/ACT score. It's certainly possible that schools may decide to modify these policies in response to COVID, so athletes, stay flexible!)

Keep in touch with your own high school coaches (even if your sports are canceled right now at your school and you're on what feels like a permanent off-season). Reach out to college athletics departments and, if you're able to, meet with the coach of the team you're interested in. (This doesn't have to be in-person!) Use your social media (which coaches will look at!) to showcase both your athletic ability and your personality and interests.

Do not assume that a school is not interested in you merely because you have not been approached by a scout during the year. Get your coach to write letters to the schools you are interested in. Don't sell yourself short either. As my pal Kal Chany writes in *Paying for College*, "An average football player might not get a scholarship at Notre Dame, but the same applicant at Columbia might get a preferential package...Remember, too, that football is not the only sport in college. Schools also [seek] swimmers, tennis players, long-distance runners, and the like."

If your sport *is* canceled (and believe me, I really feel for you!), use the opportunity to focus on the whole self, including what makes you **YOU** beyond sports. Stay sharp. Keep in shape. Remain hopeful. There is a whole crop of students who are going through the same tough time and you will all come out the other side.

What about “grit”?

“Grit” is a buzzword that has been popular among educators and admissions officers in recent years. My own opinion is that “grit,” an amorphous quality comprised of character and commitment, is great, but it’s not actually a new element for college applications—admissions officers have been looking for it in candidates for a long time. It is commendable that education institutions are making attempts to quantify, measure, and develop “grit” in students, but I think it comes through on college applications whether we have a specific definition and measurement or not.

All of the advice in this book is intended to help you see your application, and yourself, as a whole, not a collection of statistics and checkboxes.

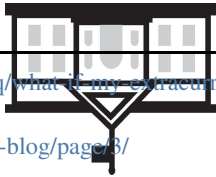
It’s my belief that a college application adds up to more than the sum of its parts—ultimately, your grades, test scores, recommendations, extracurricular activities, essays, interviews, and supplemental material tell a story about you. All of the advice in this book is intended to help you see your application, and yourself, as a whole, not a collection of statistics and checkboxes. When you are able to put your achievements and your passions together effectively, the story your college application tells is about your character, your interest in challenging yourself, and your ability to persevere.

By taking the most challenging classes available to you, taking advantage of resources and help to earn the highest grades and test scores possible, by building positive relationships with your recommenders, by articulating your interests, experiences, and growth through essays—you’re showing college admission officers that you’ve got “grit.”

Admissions Advantage or Life Advantage?

Just about everything you do to prepare for college has bigger life implications, too.

1. When you work hard in your classes in high school, you become better educated.
2. When you find and commit yourself to activities you enjoy, you discover your talents, learn to work with other people, and enjoy life outside of the classroom.
3. When you learn how to do something for yourself without relying on your parents, you become more independent and better prepared to live on your own.
4. When you find a subject that interests you and dive in to learn more, you see for yourself just how rewarding learning can be when you let your interests take you there.
5. When you struggle in a class and approach your teacher for help, you learn how to advocate for yourself and how to seek out assistance when you need it.
6. When you try your best and still come up short, you learn how to handle that failure or disappointment, learn from it, and then move on.
7. When you take all of these lessons with you to college, you get more out of the overall experience.



7. <https://mitadmissions.org/help/faq/what-if-my-extracurricular-activities-were-cancelled-or-changed-due-to-covid-19/>

8. <https://sites.gatech.edu/admission-blog/page/3/>



Chapter 5

Financial Aid & Scholarships

What is the FAFSA?

What is my Expected Family Contribution?

What's the CSS/Financial Aid Profile?

What financial information do I need to apply for financial aid using the FAFSA and/or the CSS Profile?

How does the financial aid application process differ from the admission process?

What is in my financial aid package?

What is the difference between need-based and merit-based financial aid?

How do I look for scholarships?

How do I save/pay for college?

What is a need-blind school?

Will I be penalized if I apply for financial aid? Will colleges look favorably on me if I don't apply for financial aid?

Can I appeal my financial aid decision?

Is it a smart move to attend a two year / associates degree-granting school first to save money?

CHAPTER 5

Financial Aid & Scholarships

Many folks find the financial aid process complicated enough, but the COVID pandemic has created a host of new and perplexing questions. The average sticker price (tuition, fees, room and board) for one year at public four-year colleges in 2019–20 was \$21,950 (for in-state students)—a 2.6% increase over the previous year. At private four-year colleges, the average was \$49,870—a 3.3% increase. More than 70 colleges now have a sticker price of \$60,000 (or more). Those numbers sound scary, and I often hear families make assumptions like, “We can’t afford private schools,” or “We’ll never qualify for aid.” Be careful—aid assumptions like those tend to work against you when it comes to paying for college.

Here’s the bottom line: Assuming your family can’t pay for some (or any) colleges just takes options off the table. You may not be as motivated to work hard to get in. You may also eliminate certain colleges that are right for you, which are often the schools most likely to give you aid! Ultimately, you won’t know what your financial obligation will be until after you are accepted, apply for financial aid, and receive your financial aid award letter. So, as you factor the cost for college into your search, make no assumptions. Plan well, choose the right colleges, and apply for any aid that’s available to you. In this chapter, I show you how.

What is the FAFSA?

You’ll hear about the FAFSA a whole lot during the college admissions process. This is the Free Application for Federal Student Aid. It’s a long form that collects student and parent financial information and is used to determine the student’s eligibility for financial aid. Even if you don’t think you’re eligible, you should still submit the form, just in case—you have nothing to lose.

When applying for college, you do not need to complete the FAFSA for each school where you plan to apply. You will be able to list up to ten schools

on the application to receive the relevant information. You will need to complete the FAFSA each year you require aid. The form is updated each year and made available on October 1, for use in the following academic year. The FAFSA is available online, on paper, or as a downloadable PDF at fafsa.ed.gov. College financial aid deadlines vary. I strongly recommend submitting your FAFSA at the same time as your application for admission, and submitting it as soon as possible after October 1 each year thereafter.

Crafting an appeal is a delicate art and should only be undertaken if you have a strong case for revisiting your aid decision.

The financial information you enter on the FAFSA will cover the amount of money you and your parents or guardians made during the calendar year two years before you enter college—this is called the “base income year” on the FAFSA. You may also see it called the Prior Prior Year (PPY), which refers to the year before the prior tax year. For a student entering college directly after high school, financial aid eligibility will be based on their family’s financial situation during 10th grade second semester and 11th grade first semester.

Take note: Your family may have experienced a decrease in income between the base income year and your FAFSA submission, which makes that base income year totally irrelevant to your current situation. The good news is that colleges are allowed (although not required) to use *another* 12-month period of income that is more “representative” of a parent’s current situation. My friend Kal Chany, author of *Paying for College*, advises that if a parent or guardian is making less money (because of COVID or for whatever reason), you should explain your changed circumstances in a letter, which you will submit *after* you get a financial aid package, and ask for a reevaluation. (We’ll talk more about appealing financial aid decisions later on in this chapter). Be prepared to provide documentation of that lower income. Some schools will ask you to fill out a special appeal form that they’ve created. Provide as much supporting detail as you can and be sure to clearly and succinctly explain your situation. That will improve your chances of a successful outcome.

Average Cost of College

Average cost of a year’s tuition, room and board, and fees in 2019–2020

Private College: \$49,870

Public (In-State) College: \$21,950

*College Board, *Trends in College Pricing, 2019*

When you complete the FAFSA, you will receive a Student Aid Report that summarizes the financial information you provided and shows your Expected Family Contribution (EFC), or the amount your family will be responsible for paying toward your college costs. (I go into EFC in more detail on [this page](#).) Your Student Aid Report also will show your eligibility for different types of federal student aid. You may also be eligible for state financial aid and/or for aid granted directly by the school. Federal aid is based on adjusted gross income and assets (like property and investments). Some states base financial aid eligibility on taxable income and do not take other assets into account. All fifty states have need-based aid programs and about half offer merit-based aid, which is awarded based on your academic record and test scores instead of on your financial situation. In most cases, to be eligible for state aid, you must attend a private or public college or university within your state of residence. In some states, aid is awarded on a first-come, first-served basis, so it benefits you to apply early.

I know it sounds complicated, but financial aid is just another part of the college admission process that we can crack through research and planning.

What is my Expected Family Contribution?

When you complete the FAFSA, the federal financial aid methodology determines how much your family can afford to put toward your college education based on their income and assets. This is the Expected Family Contribution amount on your Student Aid Report. Your EFC is the same no matter where you go to school or how much that school costs. The total cost of any college includes tuition and fees, room and board, personal expenses, books and supplies, and travel—as determined by each college or university. The difference between the total cost of attendance and your EFC is called your “need.” Colleges and universities offer a wide range of aid packages to cover that need, which is why I always discourage families from crossing schools off their list early in the application process based on sticker price.

You can find financial aid and EFC “calculators” online, in which you can enter a sampling of the information you will provide on your FAFSA and find estimated college costs based on your financial situation. These can be helpful in getting oriented in college planning, but take the resulting figures with a healthy pinch of salt. Calculator methodology varies from site to site and the results are not guaranteed, even when the calculator is hosted on the college’s own website.

I always discourage families from crossing schools off their list early in the application process based on sticker price.

What's the CSS/Financial Aid Profile?

CSS stands for College Scholarship Service. This is another form that collects your financial information to determine your financial need for college, and it goes into more detail than the FAFSA does. Your state and/or some private colleges may require the CSS Profile in addition to the FAFSA, while public institutions typically rely exclusively on the FAFSA to make financial aid decisions. The CSS Profile is created by the College Board (the same entity that writes the SAT, SAT Subject Tests, and AP Exams), and unlike the FAFSA, it entails application fees. Colleges that require the CSS Profile are not trying to punish you with extra forms and fees. These schools have additional financial aid resources beyond federal funds, and their financial aid officers want to have a detailed picture of your finances so that they can try to help you cover your college costs. Institutions that rely on the FAFSA use the federal methodology to determine your eligibility for aid, while those that use the CSS most likely have their own institutional methodology. You can contact a specific school's financial aid office with any questions about their methodology and decision-making process.

When you complete the CSS Profile (which you can do on cssprofile.collegeboard.org), instead of a Student Aid Report, you will receive a Data Confirmation Report summarizing your information and confirming which schools received it.

Survey Says

81% estimate their college costs will be more than \$50,000

*Results of The Princeton Review's College Hopes & Worries Survey of college applicants and parents of college applicants.

What financial information do I need to apply for financial aid using the FAFSA and/or the CSS Profile?

For the FAFSA, you will need:

1. Completed federal tax return for the base income year (two calendar years before you or your student will enter college)
2. W-2 forms for the base income year
3. Records of any untaxed income for the base income year, if applicable. Examples include social security, welfare, tax-exempt interest
4. Bank statements for the base income year
5. Brokerage statements for the base income year, if applicable
6. Mortgage statements for any properties other than your primary residence for the base income year, if applicable
7. Student's social security number (and driver's license number if the student has one)
8. Any financial statements or corporate tax returns for businesses owned by parents or entrepreneurial applicants for the base income year
9. Other investment statements and records for the base income year
10. Records of child support paid or received during the base income year

For the CSS Profile, in addition to the 10 items above, you will also need:

1. Records of medical and dental expenses paid during the base income year
2. Records of any post-secondary tuition paid or that will be paid during the academic year before the year for which you are applying for aid
3. Records of any educational loan payments made or to be made during

the two calendar years prior to the year for which you are applying for aid

4. Mortgage statements for your primary residence for the base income year, if applicable
5. Financial aid awarded to any member of your household, if applicable, for the academic year prior to the year for which you are applying for aid

How does the financial aid application process differ from the admission process?

Admission Aid		
Application Application		
CBS/Profile if required		
State Coalition Application		
Schools online if application		
Yes and no regarding		
financial picture		
Rigor of high school courses		
Recommendations Essays		
Extracurriculars		
Supplemental application material		
Beg the best case you can file Top 1000 schools at the For the application and Typically have 15 days and college request that all aid forms are completed with your admission application. I recommend submitting your financial aid forms ASAP after October 1.		

What is in my financial aid package?

Your financial aid award letter will include details on the combination of aid that the school can offer to meet your demonstrated financial need. There are three types of aid:

Grants and Scholarships

Grants and scholarships consist of money that you won't have to pay back! Grants may be funded by the federal government, the state, or the college. Grants are tax-free. Most scholarships are awarded by the college or university, and may include eligibility criteria, like meeting a GPA threshold or participating in an extracurricular leadership development program. Some schools are more transparent than others about the amount of grant money available to students, which is usually based on the school's endowment and aid policy. Some schools guarantee grants or scholarships for accepted students who meet GPA and test score thresholds. Some find creative ways to give aid to all of their students. Cooper Union in New York, NY, awards every student who attends a scholarship to cover half of their tuition, and all students are automatically considered for additional merit-based aid. Berea College in Berea, KY, awards every admitted student a Tuition Promise Scholarship, which is combined with financial aid to cover the full cost of tuition. (Keep in mind that tuition does not include room and board, personal expenses, or travel.) At Guilford College in Greensboro, NC, every student in the class of 2019 received some amount of scholarship money. These are just three examples of schools with strong public track records of awarding generous financial aid.

Student Loans

Even with favorable borrowing and repayment terms, be wary of accruing debt in college, and take out private unsubsidized loans as little as possible.

Education loans are typically taken out by students rather than their parents. Federal and state loans are often subsidized, and below-market interest rates

guaranteed, by the government. You won't have to pay back the loans until you graduate, and many loan programs offer income-based repayment options. Even with favorable borrowing and repayment terms, be wary of accruing debt in college, and take out private unsubsidized loans as little as possible.

Federal Work-Study

This is a program through which the government provides money to the school to fund part-time jobs on campus for students. The money you earn through a work-study job goes to tuition and/or living expenses. It's also an opportunity to gain valuable work experience—many schools guarantee jobs to students who are eligible for work-study, and these experiences can help you find more lucrative summer employment and/or build your resume. The financial aid office will have a list of open positions and guidance on applying. Jobs will likely run the gamut from food prep in the cafeteria to handling confidential information in the development office.

The money you earn through a work-study job goes to tuition and/or living expenses.

8 Quick Tips for Getting Financial Aid

1. **Learn how financial aid works.** The more and the sooner you know about how need-based aid eligibility is determined, the better you can take steps to maximize such eligibility.
2. **Apply for financial aid no matter what your circumstances.** Some merit-based aid can only be awarded if the applicant has submitted financial aid application forms.
3. **Don't wait until the student is accepted to apply for financial aid.** Do it when applying for admission.
4. **Complete all the required aid applications.** All students seeking aid must submit the FAFSA (Free Application for Federal Student Aid); other forms may also be required. Check with each college to see what's required and when.
5. **Get the best scores you can on the SAT or ACT.** They are used not only in admission decisions but they can also impact financial aid. If your scores and other stats exceed the school's admission criteria, you are likely to get a better aid package than a marginal applicant.

6. **Apply strategically to colleges.** Your chances of getting aid will be better at schools that have generous financial aid budgets. (Check the Financial Aid Ratings for various schools on [PrincetonReview.com](https://princetonreview.com).)
7. **Don't rule out any school as too expensive.** A generous aid award from a pricey private school can make it less costly than a public school with a lower sticker price.
8. **Take advantage of education tax benefits.** A dollar saved on taxes is worth the same as a dollar in scholarship aid. Look into Coverdell, 529 Plans, education tax credits, and loan deductions.

*From *Paying for College* by Kalman Chany

What is the difference between need-based and merit-based financial aid?

“Need-based” financial aid is determined by your household finances and intended to cover the difference between your Expected Family Contribution and the total cost of attending college.

When you are researching application deadlines for your prospective colleges, make a note of any scholarships for which you might be a competitive candidate and their deadlines.

“Merit-based” financial aid is determined by the college or university that has accepted you based on your academic, athletic, or artistic talent, and may be awarded regardless of your demonstrated need (that means it can lower your Expected Family Contribution). Merit-based aid is typically referred to as a grant or a scholarship, depending on the awarding institution. When you are researching deadlines for each of the schools where you plan to apply, make a note of any scholarships for which you might be a competitive candidate and their deadlines, as in some instances specific scholarships may have earlier application deadlines than regular admission or financial aid applications.

How do I look for scholarships?

The best place to look for scholarships is within the institutions to which you are applying. Most schools work to fund and award scholarships and grants based on a variety of criteria, and many automatically consider you for merit-based grants or scholarships when you apply for admission and submit your FAFSA. If you want to pursue a scholarship, though, don't assume it will be a snap; ask the admissions officers at the school of your choice how many scholarships are awarded each year, how many students apply for scholarships (or the one scholarship you have your eye on), and if the scholarship is renewable. Some scholarships are only for first-year students. Some are renewable each year, but only if you maintain a certain GPA, pursue a specific major, or continue to compete on the varsity basketball team (for example).

Scholarships from sources outside the college or university account for less than 5 percent of the financial aid awarded in the United States.

A few good places to look for scholarships outside of colleges and universities are your city/town/municipal government, your parents' or guardians' employers, and any professional or philanthropic organizations to which they might belong. Scholarships from sources outside the college or university account for less than 5 percent of the financial aid awarded in the United States. That is still a lot of money (a total of \$246 billion in student aid was available to undergraduate and graduate students in 2018-2019), but overall, your odds of using an outside scholarship to pay for college are low.

If you are considering using a scholarship search service that charges a fee, please, please, please vet it very carefully. While some of these services are legit and have been a boon for their users, some are simply charging for information you can find for free with a little legwork.

How do I save/pay for college?

To be completely frank, this topic deserves a book of its own, and happily, my friend Kalman Chany has written that book, *Paying for College*. It's packed with investment tips for saving money for college and line-by-line strategies for completing the FAFSA to help you maximize your eligibility for financial aid. In lieu of trying to pass myself off as a financial advisor here, I'm presenting an overview of calculating college costs in the future and some helpful tips that will get you oriented around college expenses.

If you're reading this book in high school, hopefully your family has already started saving when it comes to your college tuition. Don't worry if that's not your situation; there are a lot of options for paying for college, especially if you focus on earning high test scores and grades. While financial aid is based primarily on demonstrated need, applicants who are especially desirable to a college because of their strong academic performance or athletic or artistic talent may receive preferential packaging—basically, a more lucrative financial aid package, whether it's a higher total amount or is comprised of more grants or scholarships than loans.

No matter when you plan to attend college, if you're not already saving, start now. Every little bit helps, and if you can put your money into a high-yield investment or savings account, it will earn compound interest—that means more money for college. If your parents are saving for you, their accounts and investments should be in their names—putting that money in your name could impact your eligibility for financial aid.

Calculate Your Costs

According to the College Board, as of 2019-2020, the average sticker price (tuition, fees, room and board) for one year at a public four-year college was \$21,950. One year at a private four-year college will cost more than twice that, at \$49,870. The current rate at which college costs are increasing is less than 4 percent per year—believe it or not, this has fallen off from the average annual increases of 3.9% and 5.0% over the two prior decades. While we can't predict the future with perfect accuracy, we can use these figures to calculate useful estimates.

It's worth noting that we're looking at average figures, and many top

colleges have already crossed the \$70,000-a-year barrier. The more you can save for college, the more options will be available to you. You do not need to be a millionaire to obtain a college degree, however—during the 2017–2018 academic year, 86 percent of college students received some form of financial aid.

Financial Aid Terms You Need to Know

1. **Financial Aid:** A general term used to refer to a variety of programs funded by the federal and state governments as well as the individual schools to assist students with their educational costs. While the names may vary, financial aid comes in three basic forms: (1) gift aid (grants and scholarships) that does not have to be paid back (2) student loans, and (3) work-study jobs.
2. **Cost of Attendance:** A figure, estimated by the school, that includes the cost of tuition, fees, room, board, books, and supplies as well as an allowance for transportation and personal expenses. This figure is compared to the Expected Family Contribution to determine a student's aid eligibility.
3. **Expected Family Contribution (EFC):** The amount of money the family is expected to contribute for the year toward the student's cost of attendance. This figure is compared to the Cost of Attendance to determine a student's aid eligibility.
4. **Parent's Contribution:** The amount of money the parent(s) are expected to contribute for the year toward the student's Cost of Attendance.
5. **Student's Contribution:** The amount of money the student is expected to contribute for the year toward his or her cost of attendance.
6. **Need:** The amount of aid a student is eligible to receive. This figure is calculated by subtracting the Expected Family Contribution from the Cost of Attendance.
7. **Need Analysis Forms:** Aid applications used to calculate the expected family contribution. The most common need analysis forms are: the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) and the CSS/Financial Aid Profile form. Consult the individual school's financial aid filing requirements to determine which form(s) are required for that particular school.
8. **Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA):** The need analysis document written by the U.S. Department of Education. This form is required for virtually all students

seeking financial aid including the unsubsidized Stafford loan.

9. **Student Aid Report (SAR):** The multi-page report that is issued to students who have filed a completed FAFSA.
10. **CSS/Financial Aid Profile:** A need analysis application created and processed by the College Board. Also known as the CSS Profile or the Profile form.
11. **Institutional Forms:** Supplemental forms required by the individual schools to determine aid eligibility.
12. **Gift Aid:** Financial aid, usually a grant or scholarship, that does not have to be paid back and that does not involve employment.
13. **Grants:** Gift aid that is generally based on need. The programs can be funded by the federal and state governments as well as the individual schools.
14. **Pell Grant:** A federally funded need-based grant program for first-time undergraduate students (i.e., the student has not as yet earned a bachelor's or first professional degree). Funds from this program are generally awarded to lower- and lower-middle-income families. Years ago, this program was called the Basic Educational Opportunity Grant (BEOG).
15. **Scholarships:** Gift aid that is usually based on merit or a combination of need and merit.
16. **Self-Help:** The portion of the aid package relating to student loans and/or work-study.
17. **Direct Loan Program:** Formerly known as the Stafford Student Loan program, this federally funded program provides low-interest loans to undergraduate and graduate students. In most cases, repayment does not begin until six months after the student graduates or leaves school and there are no interest charges while the student is in school. For new loans disbursed after June 30, 2006, the interest rate is fixed. (Prior loans had variable rates.) There are two types of Direct loans: subsidized and unsubsidized. The subsidized Direct loan is need-based and the government pays the interest while the student is in school. The unsubsidized Direct loan is non-need-based and can be taken out by virtually all students. In many cases, students can elect to let the interest accumulate until after they graduate.
18. **Parents Loans for Undergraduate Students (PLUS):** A federally sponsored educational loan program in which parents can borrow up to the total cost of attendance minus any financial aid received for each child in an undergraduate program. Eligibility is not based on need.

19. **Federal Work Study (FWS):** A federally funded aid program that provides jobs for students. Eligibility is based on need.

What is a need-blind school?

“Need-blind” means a college or university makes admission decisions without taking into account an applicant’s financial situation. A school may also be “need-sensitive” or “need-aware,” which means that finances are considered in admissions in order to ensure that the school will be able to offer financial aid to those students who need it. While taking finances out of the admissions process may sound like a fairer process given how hard you’re working on your grades and test scores, it can be disappointing for students who are accepted but find their demonstrated financial need is not met by their financial aid package.

For applicants, a need-blind admission policy is most meaningful when it is combined with a commitment from the school to meet every accepted student’s demonstrated need. In most cases, these policies only apply to U.S. applicants, due to the college’s resources and the fact that international students are not eligible for federally funded aid. There are currently only seven colleges in the U.S. that extend need-blind, full-need admissions for both U.S. and international students: Amherst College, Curtis Institute of Music, Harvard College, MIT, Princeton University, Yale University, and the Minerva Schools at KGI (part of the Claremont University Consortium)—all highly selective schools with very competitive applicant pools. The remainder of the Ivy League is need-blind for U.S. students, need-sensitive for international students, and will meet the full demonstrated need for all accepted students. An additional thirty-seven selective schools follow the same policies (some examples: Duke University, Rice University, and The University of Chicago). Some public universities will consider in-state students under need-blind, full-need policies, but not out-of-state students.

Survey Says

What’s the biggest concern of students and parents about applying to college?

44% say level of debt to pay for the degree

29% say will get into first-choice college, but won’t be able to afford to attend

20% say won't get into first-choice college

7% say will attend a college I (my child) may not be happy about

*Results of The Princeton Review's College Hopes & Worries Survey of college applicants and parents of college applicants.

Will I be penalized if I apply for financial aid? Will colleges look favorably on me if I don't apply for financial aid?

These two questions are asking the same thing: At colleges and universities that are need-blind, do students who can pay full freight for four years have an edge when it comes to gaining admission? Sometimes. If you are in this fortunate position and your dream school is a highly selective, need-blind university, you might want to confirm that a couple of other schools on your list are need-aware. If you know you will need financial aid to complete your degree and your dream school is need-aware, you might consider adding a need-blind college to your list.

Ultimately, these policies should not play a major role in choosing the colleges that fit you best. Most colleges and universities do not give your finances significant weight in admission decisions. You are better served focusing on the college's academic offerings and extracurricular resources when choosing where to apply and working on your grades and test scores to increase your chances of acceptance.

The only scenario where the ability to pay for college can meaningfully impact your college decision is if your application lands in the “maybe” pile at a need-aware institution. In that case, being able to pay full sticker price may help move you into the “accepted” category.

Need-aware admission policies also do not provide strategic leverage on your application. The only scenario where the ability to pay for college can meaningfully impact your college decision is if your application lands in the “maybe” pile at a need-aware institution. In that case, being able to pay full sticker price may help move you into the “accepted” category. If you have a lackluster transcript and average test scores, your bank account is not going to get you into college. If you will need financial aid and anticipate that you are eligible for it, you should apply for it and answer any relevant questions on your college application honestly (the Common Application asks if you will be applying for aid or not). If you indicate on your application that you will

not need aid and get accepted, you won't be able to apply for financial aid later—the school's financial aid office will have already apportioned the aid available for the year. It doesn't matter if you get into a great school if you can't pay for it (and taking on loads of debt to pay for college isn't a great idea for your financial future).

Need-Blind vs Need-Aware Admission	
Need-Blind Admission	Need-Aware Admission
Need-blind admission means that an applicant's ability to pay for their education will not be a factor in the college's decision to admit, wait-list, or deny the applicant. Need-blind admission doesn't require that an applicant with demonstrated financial need be awarded financial aid, nor does it require that 100 percent of the applicant's demonstrated need be met.	Need-aware admission means an applicant's ability to pay for their education when making admission decisions. This control can allow colleges to meet full need for all accepted students.

Can I appeal my financial aid decision?

Yes, but doing so requires a delicate approach and sound reasoning. If the financial aid package you have received works for your financial situation, you are unlikely to be granted additional funding. Parents, you may pride yourselves on your business negotiation or bargain haggling skills, but you'll find that financial aid officers won't be worn down or tricked into making college tuition a better deal for you. If, however, the package offered by your dream school is prohibitively low, or if you are trying to decide between two schools with similar reputations that have offered you different aid packages, it may be worth approaching the financial aid office for a discussion. You won't be risking your initial offer in doing so.

Send in your appeal as soon as possible after the financial aid package arrives.

Below, find our tips on appealing your financial aid decision, culled from *Paying for College*.

1. **Timing is everything.** Because of the huge number of parents who are expected to appeal this year (for COVID-related reasons or otherwise), you should send in your appeal as soon as possible after the financial aid package arrives.
2. **Reach out.** Call the financial aid office or ask for an in-person meeting if it's a safe possibility to do so. Ask to speak to or meet with the head of the office, if possible.
3. **Get prepped.** Have copies of your FAFSA and other financial aid forms on hand, as well as any other aid offers you are considering.
4. **Be honest.** Any claims you make about your finances or another school's offer must be backed up by documentation.
5. **Be polite.** Aggression or confrontation will not earn you any love from financial aid officers.

Is it a smart move to attend a two year/associates degree–granting school first to save money?

If you plan to begin your degree at one school and graduate from another, it is essential that your pre-transfer grades are excellent.

I've heard more and more questions like this as college costs have increased dramatically in recent years and families are experiencing sticker shock. If your goal is to obtain a bachelor's degree but you're finding that a four-year school seems cost-prohibitive no matter how you crunch the numbers, you might consider starting at a community college or public in-state university and applying to transfer to your dream school after one or two years. The total cost of your degree will be significantly lower than four years of private college. You will be more likely to transfer your credits from another four-year degree program to the school that will ultimately award your degree than from an associate's or two-year program—and, in the event that plans change, you're still on track to a bachelor's degree. (I dive into transfer applications in Chapter 8.)

One caveat: Transferring colleges can be trickier than applying right out of high school. If you plan to begin your degree at one school and graduate from another, it is essential that your pre-transfer grades are excellent. Make sure you leverage every possible resource for academic support, whether that's the university writing center, a professor's office hours, or peer tutoring.

9 Creative Ways to Pay Less for College

1. **Attend a community college for two years and transfer to a pricier school to complete the degree.** Plan ahead: Be sure the college you plan to transfer to will accept the community college credits.
2. **Look into “cooperative education” programs.** Over 900 colleges allow students to combine college education with a job. It can take longer to complete a degree this way. But

graduates generally owe less in student loans and have a better chance of getting hired.

3. **Take as many AP courses as possible and get high scores on AP exams.** Many colleges award course credits for high AP scores. Some students have cut a year off their college tuition this way.
4. **Earn college credit via “dual enrollment” programs available at some high schools.** These allow students to take college level courses during their senior year.
5. **Earn college credits by taking CLEP (College-Level Examination Program) exams.** Depending on the college, a qualifying score on any of the thirty-three CLEP exams can earn students three to twelve college credits.
6. **Stick to your college and your major.** Changing colleges can result in lost credits. Aid may be limited to or unavailable for transfer students at some schools. Changing majors can mean paying for extra courses to meet requirements.
7. **Finish college in three years, if possible.** Take the maximum number of credits every semester, attend summer sessions, and earn credits via online courses. Some colleges offer three-year programs for high-achieving students.
8. **Let Uncle Sam pay for your degree.** ROTC (Reserve Officer Training Corps) programs available from U.S. Armed Forces branches (except the Coast Guard) offer merit-based scholarships up to full tuition via participating colleges in exchange for military service after you graduate.
9. **Better yet:** Attend a tuition-free college.

*From *Paying for College* by Kalman Chany





Chapter 6

Application

What is the Common Application?

Are there other applications like the Common Application? Is one better than another?

What do admission officers look for in an application essay?

When should I start the application process?

Should I declare a major on my application or apply undecided?

How important is optional or supplementary application material?

Is a college interview required? What should I expect?

Who should I ask to write my letters of recommendation?

CHAPTER 6

Application

To become a competitive college applicant, you have three jobs to do while you're in high school:

1. Be awesome academically and take on a challenging work load.
2. Do well on standardized tests.
3. Research colleges to equip yourself with as much information as possible.

Of course, there's still one more activity you'll need to complete if you want to go to college—the actual process of applying to college.

What is the Common Application?

The Common Application is an online app that you can use to submit your information to multiple schools. Nearly 900 colleges and universities accept the Common App. While different schools often use different essay prompts or ask you to answer additional questions in shorter form, all schools need your contact details, the name of your high school, a list of your extracurricular activities, some information about your family, and so on. Having a tool that allows you to create a profile of this information that you can send to most, if not all, of the schools on your list is a major time saver. When I applied to college, I had to enter the same information about ourselves over and over on paper forms by hand! The Common App also makes it easy to keep track of which documents you've completed and submitted to each school.

The Common App is updated for each academic year on August 1. You can create an account at commonapp.org. Be sure to confirm each school's specific admission requirements, like the number of recommendation letters you'll need, SAT Subject Test minimums, and school-specific forms or essays, as well.

For 2020–2021, the Common App is providing students with the space to explain how COVID has affected them personally and academically. This is a good thing! Here is the question in full:

Community disruptions such as COVID-19 and natural disasters can have deep and long-lasting impacts. If you need it, this space is yours to describe those impacts. Colleges care about the effects on your health and well-being, safety, family circumstances, future plans, and education, including access to reliable technology and quiet study spaces.

- *Do you wish to share anything on this topic? Y/N*
- *Please use this space to describe how these events have impacted you.*

The space is yours to explain a dip in your science grade as you got used to your new remote classroom or how the new family responsibility of watching your younger siblings after school barred you from joining the French Club as you'd planned.

4 Tips for Managing College Application Stress (from Real Students Who Have Been There)

1. **Mark everything on a calendar.** "Create a schedule for application and scholarship deadlines and prioritize by the due dates."
2. **Be open-minded.** "College is about finding your happiness, not your parents' happiness or what would look good on your bumper."
3. **Keep the end goal in mind.** "Don't get frustrated with applications. Just think of how good you'll feel in the fall walking the halls of your chosen college."
4. **Ask questions.** "Guidance counselors, your parents, and your friends are there for you to help with your stress levels and the college decision process. While you may feel alone with your emotions over college, the people you are surrounded with have probably felt the same way you do now."

*Results of The Princeton Review's College Hopes & Worries Survey

Are there other applications like the Common Application? Is one better than another?

There are a few similar application options for smaller cohorts of schools. ApplyTexas is an application system for public universities and many other institutions in Texas; California uses one system for all the University of California schools and another system for all Cal State University schools. There is also an alternative to the Common App called the Coalition Application that is accepted by 140 colleges and universities. The information on the Coalition App will be substantively similar to what is collected on the Common App, but the digital interface is different. The Coalition Application makes it simple to apply for application fee waivers and provides online tools you can use to share your application materials for feedback with your teachers and counselors.

If a school accepts more than one type of application, you should choose the option that works best for you—admission officers do not prefer one over the other.

Some colleges use one application type exclusively. Others may accept either the Common Application or the Coalition Application and might have a proprietary application in the mix, too. If a school accepts more than one type of application, you should choose the option that works best for you—admission officers do not prefer one over the other.

The Coalition Application app handles their COVID question a little differently than the Common App, but the goal is the same: to communicate to colleges how the pandemic affected your family circumstances from dealing with illness to losing an after-school job. This time you'll have an optional "check-all-that-apply" style question plus an optional text field if you choose to say more. Here's the question text in full:

Natural disasters and emergency situations like the COVID-19 pandemic have impacted the lives of many students and their families. While entirely optional, you may share information here regarding how any of these events have affected you or your family circumstances.

Choose all of the following that apply to you:

☐

I had inconsistent or unreliable access to home internet and/or a computer, laptop or tablet.

☐

At least one parent/guardian lost their job or was unable to work.

☐

I lost my job or was no longer able to work.

☐

At least one parent, guardian or caretaker was considered an essential worker (e.g. healthcare worker, grocery store employee, public transportation driver, first responder, sanitation worker) and was required to work.

☐

I was considered an essential worker and required to work.

☐

My community had a curfew affecting the hours I could travel, use electricity, or access the internet.

☐

My home responsibilities (i.e. childcare, elder care, etc.) substantially increased or changed.

☐

My health was affected.

☐

A member of my household's health was affected.

☐

None of these apply to me.

☐

I would like to provide additional information. (Text box appears providing for 300 words max)

Types of College Applications			
Character Examples:			

Universal College Application form used by over 900 colleges and universities		
Coalition Application colleges application and digital portfolio used by the 140 members of the Coalition for Access, Affordability, and Success.		
Universal College Application used by 4 colleges and universities		
College Specific Applications have their own UC exclusive application. University of Texas (ApplyTexas)		
Note: Many colleges accept more than one type of application. For example, Harvard College accepts the Common Application, the Universal College Application, or the Coalition Application.		

What do admission officers look for in an application essay?

First and foremost, application readers want to know that you can write. That doesn't mean you need to use a lot of big words or flowery metaphors. Your sentences should be clear, your ideas organized and logical, and your grammar, punctuation, and spelling should be flawless. Patience, revision, and proofreading will help you refine these aspects of your essay. Start writing early and give yourself time to work through a few drafts.

What to write about is another matter, and one of the more overwhelming and anxiety-inducing aspects of the admission process. Most schools that require essays will provide a writing prompt, or a few prompts to choose from, but many of the prompts or questions used are open-ended enough that you can write about almost anything. Choose something that is important to you and will give you opportunities to tell admission officers about yourself. You should be able to explain why the topic or experience matters to you and how it has influenced you.

Take note: Many students are likely to write about their experience during the coronavirus pandemic for the next few years, which might make it harder to distinguish yourself to the admission committee if you take that essay route. There are many other topics that demonstrate the depth and breadth of who you are! (Check out our book *The Complete Guide to College Application Essays* for tons more advice on this front). Plus, both the Common Application and the Coalition Application have added COVID-specific questions this year to allow students who want to write about the pandemic a place to do so apart from their main essay.

It's also important that your voice comes through in your essay. You don't need to be overly ambitious with your writing style or form, and a tone that feels affected or inauthentic may work against you. Think about how you would tell the story of your essay in a face-to-face interview. When you write with language that doesn't come naturally to you, it shows, and your essay may feel strained and miss the mark.

YOU should write your essay, not your older sibling or a parent or private admission counselor. That said, you will want to solicit feedback and proofreads from at least two other sets of eyes. Getting feedback on your work

will help you craft a stronger essay, and extra eyes will help you catch typos. Don't go overboard with input, though—too many conflicting opinions and suggestions can make you doubt your instincts and result in a flat essay that feels written-by-committee.

If you are applying to several schools, be very careful when re-using essays on different applications. You may need to make small tweaks to your main essay for each school. Make sure the essays you're submitting are responses to the school's prompts, and ALWAYS double-check any school names in your essays or short answers—many, many admission officers have told me about receiving essays in which the applicant has left in a mention of another college. That's a fast track to the rejection pile.

5 Tips for College Essays

- 1. Tell the story that grades and test scores can't capture.**
A thoughtful and sincere essay about something that's important to you—an experience, a person, or a book—shows colleges the unique qualities you will add to the incoming class.
- 2. Always be yourself in your application, not the candidate you think admission committees want to see.**
Sometimes it's better to write about an experience that was hard for you because you learned something than it is to write about something that was easy for you because you think it sounds impressive.
- 3. Remember to reflect.** You're not the only applicant to win the class presidency, go on a service trip, or suffer an athletic injury. Take the opportunity to really examine how an experience taught you something you didn't previously know about yourself, got you out of your comfort zone, or forced you to grow.
- 4. Start early, and write several drafts.** Coming up with an original, thoughtful essay topic will inevitably take a fair amount of brainstorming. Make sure you start writing early in the application process.
- 5. Ask a parent, teacher, or friend you trust to be your editor.** The more time you spend with a piece of your own writing, the less likely you are to spot errors (and your college essays must be 100 percent typo free!).

When should I start the application process?

Ideally, you should be thinking about college throughout high school, choosing courses and extracurriculars that will set you up to be a competitive applicant, researching and visiting (online or in person, if possible) in your junior year, and preparing for the SAT and/or ACT before the start of your senior year.

The more time you give yourself to craft a strong application, the less stressed out you will feel and the more options you will have if something goes unexpectedly off the rails.

As for completing the application itself, my advice has always been to start early, and this has been echoed by many parents and students on our annual “College Hopes & Worries” survey over the years. The more time you give yourself to craft a strong application, the less stressed out you will feel and the more options you will have if something goes unexpectedly off the rails. If you are completing the Common Application, you can start working on it as early as August 1st (Note: In recent years, the Common App has announced its new essay prompts for the upcoming academic year as early as February, so keep a lookout and you may be able to start drafting your essays even earlier). If you are applying for financial aid, you will be able to start the FAFSA as early as October 1. College application deadlines vary, but typically Early Decision deadlines fall in early November and Regular deadlines fall in early January. If any of the colleges on your list have rolling admissions, applying as early as possible can help give your application a boost. Rolling admission means that applications are accepted over a few months, and admissions decisions are made as applications are received, instead of all at once following a cut-off date. So, there are a lot more spots open at those schools early in the application timeframe than there will be closer to their final deadline.

Another good reason to begin preparing your application materials early is that you will need to rely on other folks or systems to obtain some materials, and this can take a bit of time. Your high school is processing requests for

academic transcripts for all your peers applying to college, so confirming that your transcripts have been sent may take a few days or weeks. If you have concerns about your standardized test scores, you may want additional time to prep for and retake the SAT and/or ACT. Like transcripts, your official score reports will take a few weeks to reach the colleges where you're applying. Once you've completed the FAFSA, and the CSS Profile, if necessary, the official analysis of your financial information can take up to four weeks before it is provided to your schools. And don't forget about letters of recommendation. You should give your letter-writers at least a month to draft and submit your recommendations, especially if you know they are writing recommendations for many other applicants.

College Essay Advice (from a Real Student Who Has Been There)

"Once the Common Application or specific college applications open, look over the essay questions and requirements. Begin gathering ideas and outlines for them over the summer after Junior Year. Have rough drafts as early as possible to begin editing and accommodating the word counts."

—College Hopes & Worries Survey

Parent to Parent

College to Career

"We pick schools in an upside down fashion. We pick a school based on reputation, then find a major we think we might like, and then four years later try to shoehorn a career around it.

The better way—Determine the career, understand which major will best lead to that career, then find the school that does the best job for that major/career."

—College Hopes & Worries Survey

Should I declare a major on my application or apply undecided?

Unless you are applying to a specific school within a university or unique program dedicated to an academic track, you do not need to declare a major on your college application. If you do inform the admissions office of what you'd like to study, no one will hold you to that later if you change your mind. In most liberal arts academic programs, students must declare a major by the end of sophomore year. If you don't know what major to choose, you'll have time to evaluate the different academic offerings (and work towards any general education requirements) at your school during your first two years, and you'll spend your junior and senior year focusing on the requirements for your major.

It's common for parents and applicants to believe that declaring a major on a college application matters in the admission decision. Some people think that declaring a major shows focus and passion, and helps to communicate what you will bring to the campus community. Some people worry that admission officers have quotas for different majors and committing to something popular like English may work against them if many other students have chosen the same major. In most cases, admission officers do not expect the majority of high school seniors to have their careers mapped out, nor will they penalize you if you know what you want to study. If you must declare a major on your application and it will be considered inside the admissions office, the school will make that clear.

If you do know what you want to study, go ahead and include that in your application. The more information admission officers have about you, the clearer it will be that you're a great fit for their school.

College Major Advice (from a Real Student Who Has Been There)

"Still go to college even if you do not know what you want to study. Don't let the unknown scare you because you might find out your passion in college."

How important is optional or supplementary application material?

It's right there in the name: optional or supplemental.

If you don't submit any additional information or achievements outside the required application materials, the lack thereof won't work against you. If you have not found a place in your application to share an interest, pursuit, or accomplishment, this is your chance to do so—it never hurts to provide admission officers with additional information on your strengths and skills.

Optional or supplemental application material is a great way to share something visual with admission officers, like an art portfolio, a video of a theatrical performance or debate team competition. Visual media has the additional value of helping you stand out in both the applicant pool and an admission officer's mind.

You don't need to leverage optional/supplemental material for anything that would be redundant with other parts of your application. If you're required to submit an academic writing sample with your application, you don't need to submit a second sample here. If you've won academic awards or athletic competitions and these are listed on your application or appear in your essay, there's little benefit in restating these achievements here. Admission officers are incredibly busy during application season, and most aren't able to give optional/supplemental material more time and attention than the average application receives. If your application is a complete and accurate picture of you, you've done a great job and don't need to add anything additional. If you do want to submit additional material, make sure that it's adding something to your application, that it can be understood quickly by busy admission officers, and that you follow the school's directions for submitting material to a T.

Is a college interview required? What should I expect?

Interview requirements differ from school to school. Many colleges and universities offer applicants the opportunity to interview on campus or via video conferencing with a member of the admissions team or with an alum who has been trained to perform interviews. Often interviews are optional or encouraged rather than required. If you are able to interview, whether it's required or not, I recommend that you do! This is another opportunity to make an impression on the admissions committee and share what you can uniquely bring to campus. Many colleges are expanding their virtual interview options in light of COVID—take these opportunities when they are given!

A college interview is also helpful to make sure the school where you're applying is a good fit for you. Your interviewer is representing the campus community, so if you connect with them, that's a good sign. It's also an awesome opportunity to ask in-depth questions about the school that you haven't been able to answer through your research. Not only will you get some info that you want, but you'll show the interviewer that you're invested in attending the school, curious, and informed. Try to avoid asking generic questions or questions that you could easily answer online.

Be specific when you talk about your interest in the school. Why does it feel like a good fit for you? What about it stood out when you were visiting or researching? Alumni who conduct admission interviews are typically people who valued their college experience and remain involved with the community—they love their alma maters, and they want to know that you will, too.

With any interview, you should prepare for commonly asked questions, and try to practice with a parent, teacher, or counselor to make sure you know your talking points and feel comfortable adapting if you get a question you're not expecting. You want to present yourself as confident and comfortable, but also as professional and poised. If you've interviewed before for a job or internship, you have valuable experience. If you haven't yet, your college admissions interview will be a valuable learning experience you can draw on in future job interviews.

For video interviews, you should always prepare your home “interview space” in advance. So, set up your computer in a clean, well-lit (and quiet!)

corner of your house, test that your computer's microphone and camera are in working order, and dress for the part of eager, college hopeful.

Interview Tips (from Real Students Who Have Been There)

Don't just take my word for it. Here are some smart tips from last year's crop of college applicants.

1. **Interviewers know sincere enthusiasm when they see it.** "Before you apply to any college, learn about all the reasons that make you want to go there. This really helps as not only will this be used in the interviews but also in your application; your application must talk about you, and how you see yourself in the college."
2. **Politeness pays off.** "Always send 'thank you' notes."
3. **Be true to you.** "Colleges want to know how you are as a person, so in interviews and such, just be yourself! Show them your awesome identity!"
4. **Show them you're serious.** "If you are really interested in a college, let them know! Request an informal alumni interview before interviewing with an admissions counselor."
5. **Knowing you're prepared will help you relax.** "Take many deep breaths. Practice and go into interviews with confidence!"

*Results of The Princeton Review's College Hopes & Worries Survey

College Interview FAQs

If you're ready to discuss these seven topics, you'll be ready for your college interview.

1. What's an example of a challenge that you overcame, and what did you learn from it?
2. What's your favorite high school class and why?
3. Tell me something about you that I wouldn't know from your application.
4. What do you plan to study in college? (Hint: if you're undeclared, that's totally okay—this question gives you an opportunity to talk about different majors or careers you are considering and how you might go about choosing a major if

you're accepted.)

5. Why do you want to attend this college or university?

6. What do you enjoy doing when you're not in class?

7. Do you have any questions for ME?

Who should I ask to write my letters of recommendation?

While your grades, test scores, and transcript will always be the most crucial parts of your application, letters of recommendation are very important—especially during COVID when you might have fewer data points to help you stand out. These letters represent professional adults, usually teachers and guidance counselors, who are endorsing your academic performance and your future plans. You will probably need at least two letters of recommendation from teachers you’ve had for academic subjects (as opposed to electives), though some schools ask for three recommendations or offer you the option of submitting additional letters of support from coaches, employers, or counselors. These recommendations are submitted directly to the school—you won’t get to see them before the admission officers do.

You will want to choose your recommenders wisely; you don’t have to ask the teachers who gave you the best grades. In fact, a teacher who has seen you face challenges and has supported your growth would be in a terrific position to write you a recommendation. You should choose teachers with whom you have a connection and who are familiar with your academic track record. If you’re unsure who to ask for recommendation letters, you should talk through your options with a parent or your high school guidance counselor. If you’re reading this book in 9th or 10th grade, think about how you might build relationships with teachers you like. Look for opportunities to ask for extra help or work with the teacher outside of class, and think about your class participation. Do you have a lot to say in class? How does the teacher respond? You’ll want to build similar relationships with your college professors and eventually with work superiors, so this is a skillset that you will use throughout your life.

Plan ahead and approach these tasks professionally. Chances are you are not the only student asking for a recommendation letter during application season, so be sure to give your recommenders enough time to draft and submit your letters before the deadline. They will either need to mail signed hard copies or use online tools to securely submit their letters (both the Common App and Coalition App have options for submitting recommendation letters online). When you ask your teachers to write you recommendations, you should have any materials (forms, addressed stamped envelopes), deadlines, URLs, and submission instructions they will need to submit letters on time. I

recommend that you also offer a list of extracurricular activities, a draft of your college essay, and any other info that you think might be relevant. This will help give your teacher fodder for their letter and put their recommendation into the full context of your application. It's especially helpful if you're approaching a teacher you had before senior year—you can update them on your latest accomplishments. Finally, don't forget to be polite when you ask for letters, and send a thank you note for the letter once you've submitted your application. It's poor form to wait until you're accepted by the college to say thank you, but you should absolutely let your recommenders know when and where you get in—they're invested in your admission process, too.

How to Ask for Letters of Recommendation

Emailing your teacher at 2 a.m. to ask if that teacher can write a letter of recommendation for an application that's due in two weeks? Not good.

1. **Check with your high school counselor first.** Some high schools have established systems they want their students to follow for requesting letters of recommendation.
2. **Ask early.** Preferably as early as possible in your senior year or even in your junior year (once you have the necessary materials).
3. **Get detailed.** Give your teacher some indication of why you are asking them, in particular. I recommend giving your teacher a list of your extracurricular activities, a draft of your application essay, and any other information you think is important so they have ideas for what to write in the letter.
4. **Be exceedingly polite.** Remember, you're basically assigning your teachers homework. Above all else, be kind and considerate when interacting with your teacher.
5. **Send your teachers each college's specific instructions and deadlines.** You may need to fill out a form from the college, provide credentials and information for a college's online application system, or get an addressed and stamped envelope.

8 Questions to Ask Your High School Counselor

Your high school counselor is your #1 resource for college prep and applications. Here are some questions to kick off the process.

1. What's the right high school schedule for me?
2. Am I on track for graduation requirements?
3. Are any colleges visiting our high school this year?
4. What are some appropriate colleges for me to look at?
5. What extracurricular activities can I get involved with?
6. What do I need to fill out the FAFSA?
7. Can you help me find local scholarships?
8. Do you have any special instructions for students requesting transcripts, counselor reports, or letters of recommendation?





Chapter 7

Inside the Admission Office

What are my chances of getting into my dream school?

How are my application materials reviewed?

Who is on the admission committee?

What is the single most important thing admission officers look for in an application?

Will applying Early Decision or Early Action give me a leg up?

What does it mean to be deferred? What can I do to improve my chances of acceptance?

What are my chances of getting off the waitlist?

Do admission officers look at prospective students' social media accounts?

CHAPTER 7

Inside the Admission Office

In this chapter, we take a look behind the curtain at what goes on inside a college admission office. You've hit send on your application, your transcripts and scores have all been mailed—now what? Let's investigate the review process, including who is actually reading your application, how they make a decision, and next steps you can take after an admissions roadblock like deferred admission or getting waitlisted.

What are my chances of getting into my dream school?

To honestly assess your chances at getting into a college, you need to find out how you stack up to the students who go there.

To honestly assess your chances at getting into a college, you need to find out how you stack up to the students who go there. Carefully research each college's admission standards and compare your GPA, SAT and/or ACT scores, class rank, and high school courses to see if schools you are considering are a good academic fit. Colleges publish averages for their most recently accepted first-year class on their websites, and you can also find these stats in the college profiles on PrincetonReview.com.

You'll also want to check out the school's acceptance rate, which will put those other numbers (GPA, test scores, etc.) into perspective:

- If the acceptance rate of a school is at least 50 percent, and your GPA and test scores are about the same as the middle range for the first-year

class, you can consider that a “target school.” It’s not a guarantee you’ll get in, but the odds seem to be in your favor.

- If the acceptance rate of a school is between 35 to 45 percent, your grades and test scores would need to be near the high end of the range to consider that a target school.
- Any college that accepts fewer than 20 percent of the applicants is a highly selective school and usually a reach for just about everybody.

This isn’t an exact science, as many of these schools will also be looking at activities, letters of recommendation, essays, and your interview, all of which can influence a decision.

But what is a dream school anyway? If you mean that, based on all of your research, your dream school is your best-fit school academically, campus culturally, as well as financially and from a career services perspective, then your chances of earning admission should be excellent for the simple fact that you’ve done your homework.

That’s really the ideal—finding a place where you say “YES, that’s the school for me!” and “YES, that’s the place that suits me best!” Sometimes, it’s easier said than done, as you might imagine. Sometimes it’s easy to get wowed by a school’s brand name and the perception that a school in and of itself is going to guarantee you an awesome and successful future.

The truth is that no school can ever make that guarantee, but you have the ability to earn those lofty levels of success at any school you choose. It sounds simple, and it is. Provided you do the digging and the honest research through that best-fit lens and resist being overwhelmed by brand or raw admission difficulty as the only definition of a dream school then you’re going to do oh so well!

On Dealing with Rejection (from a Real Student Who Has Been There)

“There is a place for everyone. Relax and think of it as a journey—not a race to be won, but a home to be found.”

—College Hopes & Worries Survey

How are my application materials reviewed?

What does go on behind closed doors once your application reaches the admissions office? The answer is not so simple, because colleges and universities use their own formulas. At some schools, the evaluation is an exercise in number-crunching. If you've taken the required classes, cleared the minimum GPA, and earned the minimum tests scores, you're in. Other schools undergo a more personal evaluation. They use your application to get a sense of who you are beyond the numbers and how you might contribute on campus.

Here's an example of how it can work at selective colleges (schools that admit fewer than 75 percent of their applicants):

Student's applications are handed off to an admissions officer (a "reader") for a preliminary reading. Most readers start by reviewing the rigor of your classes, the grades you've earned, and your test scores. They'll look through your essays, read your letters of recommendation, peruse your extracurriculars, and consult your interviewer's report, if applicable. During this time, readers may take notes on each part of the application and write a summary of your strengths and weaknesses and anything else that was compelling or interesting about you.

At many schools, if you're clearly admissible (meaning your high school GPA and standardized test scores, etc., sit well within or above the mean for accepted students at that school), then the decision to admit you might well rely on the positive recommendation of that first reader. The recommendation can be reviewed by others on the admission team, but basically, you've cleared the first major hurdle!

Same drill on the other end of the spectrum, if your high school GPA, standardized test scores, etc., are well below the mean, then the initial recommendation of the first admission officer to deny your application will likely stick. Don't forget, though: Colleges will absolutely consider the extenuating circumstances behind any drop in grades or test scores (for example: a rocky transition to remote learning at your high school).

If you make it past the first reader, it's possible that a second reader may weigh in and compare their impressions with those of the first reader. Some

applications may be accepted right then if both readers agree on the application, some may be sent to another senior admissions officer to review, and some may be sent to the larger committee for discussion.

5 Reasons to Take BOTH the SAT and ACT

1. **Give more information to the admissions committee.** Some of the most selective schools are reporting that as much as a quarter or more of their enrolled students submitted scores for both exams.
2. **Prep more efficiently.** Plan to take both tests and you'll be able to make an informed decision about which one best displays your strengths.
3. **Increase your chances of receiving merit aid.** Even if the college or university you're applying to doesn't require test scores for admission, ACT or SAT scores may be required to be considered for merit-based financial aid and any outside scholarship applications.
4. **Take fewer tests (no, really!).** Some schools require applicants to submit scores from the ACT or the SAT plus two to three SAT Subject tests. If you plan on taking the SAT, take the ACT too so you're covered in case something goes wrong on one of your SAT Subject Tests.
5. **Multiply your options.** When it comes to choosing test dates, considering both tests gives you more flexibility.

If your application makes it to this point, at least one of the admission officers wants to admit you! But all of the other admissions officers have applicants they want to admit, too, and at selective colleges, they can't admit everybody. Your admissions officers will plead your case by summarizing the most compelling parts of your application—anything from your riveting application essay to a single line in a recommendation letter that makes them think you will thrive at their college. They'll fight for you.

Of course, different schools will use different variations of the system described above, but here's one constant. Real humans will evaluate you. When they do, they'll look at lots of things beyond just grades and test scores.

Who is on the admission committee?

As the name implies, your admission decision doesn't rest on the whim of just one person, but it is likely in the hands of many. What a relief, right? It's good to remind ourselves that the admission review process is a VERY HUMAN process at lots and lots of schools.

Admission committees are comprised of the admission officers responsible for reading and evaluating applications from your high school (and other high schools in your state, region of the country, etc.). It's common for colleges to group applications by geographic region so that each reader is evaluating students from a particular territory, allowing readers to get familiar with the high schools in their assigned areas.

Of course, different colleges have different systems. At some, undergraduates and faculty members play a role. At others, all decisions are made by a small handful of professionals. At still others, decisions are made democratically by large committees. Depending on the size of the college, a school's Director of Admission, Dean of Admission, Vice President of Enrollment (and other top brass) may all weigh in on your application. Suffice it to say that lots more than just one person will be evaluating your application. Since the admission process can be so subjective—both for applicants and admission officers—that's such a good thing!

What is the single most important thing admission officers look for in an application?

The #1 most important piece of information that a student will submit on their college application is universal to all schools (public, private, large, small, etc.). The answer is your high school GPA/high school transcript. OK, that's clearly two different things. But, they're oh, so related!

You can never underestimate the power and raw heft of your high school transcript and GPA.

Going forth after reading this answer, you can never underestimate the power and raw heft of your high school transcript and GPA. Your high school transcript is the weightiest of documents in your application because it's a complete record of your academic achievements in four years of high school. The document contains your cumulative GPA for all four years, but also the classes you took and the grades you received in each of those classes. Most importantly, your transcript answers this question, Have you consistently challenged yourself academically throughout high school? Have you challenged yourself with regular courses? Honors classes? APs? IBs? No, this doesn't mean you have to take every single Advanced Placement class or that you can never take a fun and easy elective (not that there's anything easy about ballroom dancing, trust me). However, admission counselors are looking for evidence that you're willing to undertake challenging coursework on a consistent basis—evidence that you'll do well in college. Never underestimate the importance of your high school transcript to the college admission process.

Of course, just signing up for impressive classes won't cut the mustard—you'll have to do well in these courses, too. While it's true that it looks better to take difficult classes and not always get sky high grades than to take easy classes and always excel, a high overall GPA is crucial. What to do if you have poor grades? It's time to light a fire under them and heat them up. Don't think that just because your grades are low, everything's lost. Most college admission offices look favorably on students who start off poorly but then work to raise their grades.

I suspect you're wondering about what the second most important piece of information that you'll submit with your application might be. This one does waiver a bit from school to school, but it's still solidly the second most reported important piece of info. The answer is standardized test scores—the SAT and ACT being the most important.

How to Evaluate Your Admissions Chances

1. **Research the college's most recent first-year class.** Search for your college on [PrincetonReview.com/college-search](https://www.princetonreview.com/college-search) (or find the "Class Profile" on the college's own website).
2. **Know what stats to look for.** Find these pieces of information about the college's current first-year class:
 - The SAT/ACT range for the middle 50 percent
 - The average high school GPA
 - How many freshmen were in the top 10, 25, 50, etc., percent of their high school class
 - The overall percentage of applicants accepted
7. **Interpret the data.** The acceptance rate of a college gives you an idea of where your GPA and test scores need to be to have a good chance of admission.

Will applying Early Decision or Early Action give me a leg up?

I so want to give you a direct and universal answer to this question, but it's not so straightforward. The truth is that the answer varies from school to school. That said, the broad-brush strokes I go into below will keep things in some perspective.

But first, let's dig into the terminology.

Many colleges allow applicants to submit their materials for an early deadline (sometime in the fall) that falls before the regular deadline (usually sometime in January or February).

Early Decision is binding. This means if you are accepted through early decision, you are committed to attending that school and will withdraw any applications you may have submitted for the regular deadlines at other schools. You may not apply to more than one college under early decision. If you are not accepted, you will either be rejected or deferred. Rejected applicants may not apply again that year. Deferred applicants will be reconsidered during the regular admission period and are free to apply to other schools (More about deferred admission coming up). Early decision deadlines are often in November, and students are typically notified of the decision in December.

Early Action is non-binding. This means you are not bound to attend if you are accepted. You may also apply early action to multiple colleges. Early action deadlines usually fall at the same time as early decision.

Early Admission Strategies

Most early decision schools (that is, schools that offer an early decision admission option) admit between 10 to 20 percent of their incoming freshman classes as early decision. Hence, the majority of students are admitted through the regular decision channel.

However, there is an increasing number of early decision schools (many offering Early Decision 1 and Early Decision 2 deadline alternatives) that admit 30 to 45 percent of their freshman classes early decision! At those kinds

of schools, it makes it harder for students to be admitted through the regular decision channel. Early decision could offer a leg-up at such schools.

Early action has all the value of early decision but few of the obligations. That’s attractive from a student perspective (general sigh of relief) but offers little from the admission strategy perspective. The obvious advantage of early action over early decision is the opportunity it gives you to apply to, and ultimately compare, financial aid packages from several schools. If you are accepted early decision, you risk missing the admission deadlines of other schools while you wait for your award package to arrive. If that award is lackluster, your options are fewer.

If you’re sure that you’ve found your best-fit school, you know it’s one you want to attend, you’re a strong candidate for admission, and you know that you can afford the tuition, go ahead and apply early decision.

That is a whole lot of research and comparison to have done by fall of your senior year, though, and if you’re uncertain about any of those factors, you’re not alone! Keep your options open by applying early action or by the regular deadline.

College Admission Options			
Application Type	*Deadline	Is the decision binding?	If you're accepted, when do you decide?
Regular Admissions	On or around January 1	No	May 1
Rolling Admissions	Within the school's "application window," usually a 6-month period between August and March	No	May 1
Early Decision	November 1 or 15	Yes	N/A. Early decision is binding. If you're accepted, you're going!
Early Action	November 1 or 15	No	May 1

*ALWAYS double-check deadlines with each of your prospective schools. The deadlines listed here are approximates.

What does it mean to be deferred? What can I do to improve my chances of acceptance?

First off, being deferred doesn't mean that you've been denied. Generally, students receive deferrals if they've applied to a school through early decision or early action channels. If a school doesn't admit a student outright through those early channels (most don't), your application moves to (is "deferred to") the regular decision channel.

In my book, a deferral to that regular admission channel means opportunity! You're done with the hard work, and your application is already in the regular admission pool at your first-choice college. So, take heart. A deferral is an indication that the admission committee thinks your qualifications are solid. They are just getting a sense of the full applicant pool for the year. That same admission committee will review your application in full (again) in roughly two month's time.

Deferred? Here's what to do.

- If you haven't had an admission interview (should a school offer them), then do it!
- Remember that admission counselors reviewing your application in the regular decision channel will be reviewing your newest high school marking period grades and any new standardized test scores. Your academic awesomeness will have a chance to shine yet again!
- Here's another way to be proactive. In late January or early February, compose a letter or email to the school and ask that it be included with your application materials. The letter should provide an update on your activities since the early application deadline. Include your first semester grades and any academic highlights, new developments in your extracurricular activities, and your plans for the rest of senior year. Request an interview if you haven't had one yet. Then, reiterate your undying love for this school above all others, all the reasons why you are a great fit and your commitment to enroll if admitted.
- Full steam ahead (with regular decision applications, that is). Remain optimistic, but create your contingency plan. You already have the

foundation of a great college application. You probably already have a list of schools that you considered on your way to choosing where to submit that early application. Revisit that list. Does it include schools that suit your interests and goals? Schools you can afford to attend? Schools where you're likely to gain admittance? Prepare applications for regular decision deadlines with the same attention to detail you invested in your early application, and submit them on time. Hold out hope that you get into your top choice, but aim for acceptance at a few other schools so you have some to choose from in the spring.

What are my chances of getting off the waitlist?

I'm a glass half full kinda guy, but I would be dishonest if I told you the chances were good. Nationally, relatively few applicants placed on a waitlist earn academic admission.

But first, let's make sure we're all on the same page about what a waitlist actually is. All selective colleges admit more students than they have room for. They do this because they know that many of the students they admit won't actually enroll. Guessing how many students will enroll is a very inexact science. To protect themselves, most colleges have a waitlist. An applicant who is "waitlisted" is one who may be admitted if enough students decide to go somewhere else.

If you're waitlisted at a school you want to attend, there are some things you can do that can help your case substantially. Write a letter or e-mail reaffirming your desire to attend the school. Ask your college counselor to call the admission office. Send a letter describing any honors you've won and other achievements since you sent in your application. When colleges admit students from the waitlist, they almost always give preference to students who make it crystal clear that they really want to attend.

At the most selective schools, admissions from waitlists are sometimes few and far between. Harvard College, for example admitted zero students from the waiting list in 2019. Yale University also admitted zero waitlisted students and Stanford University admitted eight. We're all human and should recognize that it's a tough thing to reconcile in our heads. Here's the silver lining, though. If you curate a list of schools to which you'll apply (six to eight is the average number of applications submitted by individual students), then you need to be sure that you'd be thrilled (really, I mean it, THRILLED) to attend any one of them if admitted.

Do admission officers look at prospective students' social media accounts?

This answer is so easy—YES, so scrub them. Basically, anything out there in the public square that you've penned, snapped, chirped—essentially anything you've created—is all fair game to be considered and used as evaluation fodder by admission teams at schools large and small.

Want to shine online? Here are some ways to use social media to your advantage.

- Create a LinkedIn profile. Joining this professional network demonstrates you're serious about your future. Make a point to connect with teachers, employers, your parents' friends and colleagues, and others who know you. You could even direct admission teams to your LinkedIn profile by including the address in your application.
- Follow the Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook pages of your target schools. This is a great way to learn more about prospective colleges. Plus, by commenting and asking great questions, you can raise your name recognition and improve your digital footprint.
- Post your successes on your social media sites just in case someone from admissions takes a peek. Link to the editorial you've written for your school paper, upload a video of your cello recital, or post a photo of your soccer team after a big win. Share articles that underscore your interest in history or your love of modern dance.

Follow the Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook pages of your target schools.

If you're not thrilled with what shows up about you online, there are ways to fix it. Social media accounts are usually some of the top results for a Google search of your name, so cleaning up those profiles goes a long way. School activity is likely to show high up in search results as well from writing an article for the school paper to participating in an extracurricular activity or

club that's on the high school website. Try starting your own foodie blog or commenting on online news stories from your local paper or even the *New York Times* to boost your online presence. Just make sure your comments are positive.

The bottom line is that social media is yet another opportunity to show colleges who you really are beyond grades and test scores. While colleges may not officially evaluate your Twitter feed as part of the decision process, you have to assume that a curious admissions officer could take a look.

How to Email College Admission Officers

Check out my top tips for communicating with admission officers efficiently and effectively:

1. **Keep it short! Focus on your questions, not on yourself.** This is not the time to tell them how great you are.
2. **Minimize the number of questions you ask.** Make sure the answers to your questions aren't easily accessible on the school's website.
3. **Introduce yourself.** Give your name, high school graduation year, name and city of your high school either in the body of the e-mail or as an e-mail signature.
4. **Check for spelling and grammatical mistakes.** Then check again. And then one more time.
5. **Be professional.** If your e-mail address is anything other than a form of your name or initials, consider creating a new one for college correspondence.





Chapter 8

Etc.

Is the admission process different for international students?

How difficult is transferring between colleges?

Should I take a gap year and wait until the situation returns to “normal”?

How can a parent participate most effectively in his or her child’s college application process?

How do I balance schoolwork, extracurriculars, test prep, college applications, family, social life, and SANITY?!

CHAPTER 8

Etc.

These questions don't fit nicely into a tidy chapter, but I am asked them all the time. From the deciding if a gap year is right for you to maintaining your sanity during college admission season, here's everything (else) you need to know.

Is the admission process different for international students?

The admission process is a little different for international students, yes.

For one, most U.S. universities require international students to submit scores from an English language proficiency exam, like the TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) or IELTS (International English Language Testing System). Admission officers want to know that you can succeed in courses delivered in English, even if English is not your first language and if your education was not in English. This also means that many schools place a greater importance on the college essay, another demonstration of English skills.

The admit rate for international applicants is a bit lower than the overall admit rate, and the field can be competitive.

Otherwise, the factors for admission decisions are largely the same as those for domestic students: grades, test scores, and the strength of your high school curriculum. (For a refresher on crafting competitive applications, refer back to Chapter 7.)

The admit rate for international applicants is a bit lower than the overall admit rate, and the field can be competitive. According to NACAC's 2019

State of College Admission report⁹, the international student admit rate is 52 percent, while the admit rate for first-time freshman students is 66 percent. Of course, the acceptance rate for international applicants will vary school by school and can be much lower, especially at public universities. Do your research before you apply!

School	Total undergraduate enrollment	% international students in student body	# foreign countries represented
University of Pennsylvania	10,019	13%	126
Harvard College	6,695	12%	100
Massachusetts Institute of Technology	4,550	10%	103
University of Michigan—Ann Arbor	31,046	7%	100
Virginia Tech	27,730	7%	116
Georgia Institute of Technology	15,212	8%	113

**Data reported to The Princeton Review by the school from fall 2019 to spring 2020*

Financial Aid for International Students

You should also keep in mind that for students who are not U.S. citizens or eligible non-citizens, financial aid possibilities are limited. No federal aid, for example, is given to nonresident aliens although schools are free to give out their own grants and scholarships. It's possible that financial aid may not be available for international students through the universities you are considering (this depends on the college).

Check with all the schools on your list to find out what their filing requirements are for international students. Many colleges will ask that you complete special aid forms designed specifically for international students. Some of these colleges will also require a Certificate of Finance, which is issued by the family's bank and details the sources and amounts of funds

available to the international applicant.

How difficult is transferring between colleges?

Plenty of students transfer between colleges every year. In fact, about one-third of all students will swap institutions at least once before earning their degree.

Transferring colleges can be a great move if you're sure that the new school offers opportunities your current school lacks. That said, transferring involves an application process, and competition for open spots can be fierce, especially at prestigious and highly selective schools.

First, let's look at why some students decide to transfer.

1. **They're unhappy.** One excellent reason to transfer is because you are unhappy. If you find that the school you are attending is not the best-fit college for you, you don't have to settle for four years of misery. Now that you have more clarity about what you want out of your college experience, you are even better equipped to find one that will meet your academic and social expectations.
2. **They want to pursue an academic or career interest that's not supported at their current school.** Another reason to transfer is if your current school does not have a strong program in your major or area of interest. If you've decided to be a doctor and your college has a weak pre-med program, don't be afraid to look elsewhere.
3. **They want another shot at their first-choice college.** Some students who are rejected from their first-choice school attend another school with the intention of later transferring. Others begin their education at a two-year community college but ultimately want a four-year degree.
4. **They want to save tuition dollars.** A student might decide to enroll at a less expensive school so they can save money, and then transfer to a more expensive school after one or two years. This strategy can save families thousands of dollars and make a financial reach school more affordable.

I will say that if your goal is simply to enroll in a college with bigger name recognition, you might want to reconsider. The difference in reputation between your old school and your new one may not justify the time and effort

of transferring.

Transfer Applications

If you do end up deciding to transfer colleges, you'll fill out another college application (this time it might be a designated Transfer Student Application or the Common App for transfer application, depending on the school). That's right—you'll collect letters of recommendation, submit test scores, and write another round of essays.

There are some key differences though from applying to colleges the first time around.

- For one thing, your high school transcript and test scores will take a back seat to your college transcript. Standardized test scores are used (in theory) to predict college grades. Once you have college grades, the scores are less important. So, earn strong grades in college if you hope to transfer (some schools will still want to see your SAT or ACT scores as well).
- Colleges have different policies for transfer students but typically expect you to have acquired a minimum number of credits. You'll have a harder time transferring if you've completed more than two years of study, even if you abandon some of the credit you've accrued.
- Colleges usually expect transfer applicants to have clear, compelling academic reasons for wanting to switch schools. The best reason is a strong desire to pursue a course of study or experience that isn't offered at your present school. You'll have to make your case in detail and be convincing. A transfer applicant, unlike a first-year applicant, can't get away with being "undecided" about academic or career goals.
- Of course, transferring can impact your intended graduation date or study abroad plans. Be aware of the policies at your prospective transfer school. Not all classes/credits are transferable, and some schools won't accept credit from a class if you earned below a C.

Financial Considerations

Typically, transfer students are eligible for less scholarship funds than first-year students, though some schools set aside money specifically for transfer students. If you go this route, be sure to ask your prospective schools about their financial aid policies. You'll want to make sure your transfer college is a great financial fit!

Transfer Acceptance Rates

Okay, back to the original question. How difficult is it to transfer? According to NACAC's 2019 *State of College Admission* report¹⁰, the transfer acceptance rate is slightly lower than the freshman acceptance rate: "Among institutions that enroll transfer students, average selectivity for Fall 2017 was 61 percent, compared to 66 percent for first-time freshmen." Of course, your odds of acceptance as a transfer student can differ on a school-by-school basis, as you can see in the chart below. It's often significantly more difficult to be accepted to a selective school as a transfer student than it is right out of high school. MIT, for example, accepted around 7 percent of freshman applicants for academic year 2019–2020 but only 4 percent of transfer applicants.

School	# of applicants	% applicants accepted	# of transfer applicants	% transfer applicants accepted
Stanford University	47,798	4%	2,466	1%
Harvard College	43,330	5%	1,547	1%
Massachusetts Institute of Technology	21,706	7%	538	4%
Duke University	35,767	9%	1,234	7%
University of Michigan—Ann Arbor	64,917	23%	4,217	42%

**Data reported to The Princeton Review by the school from fall 2019 to spring 2020*

To boost your chances, keep those grades up, and use some old-fashioned interpersonal methods: contact college admission officers directly, and keep in touch with them.

Should I take a gap year and wait until the situation returns to “normal”?

It might seem tempting right now to take a gap year—that is, a year off between high school and college—and wait out the admission changes caused by COVID. After all, gap years can be meaningful, transformative experiences. If you decide to go that route (and we’ll dig in to *how* to decide in a moment), I recommend applying to college as a high school senior and deferring your acceptance once you get in. The same applies if you anticipate you may need to take a semester or year off before beginning college because of family or health issues—most colleges and universities are willing to work with you to form a path to graduation. Deferred acceptance is available at most colleges (although if you’re applying Early Decision or taking advantage of any immediate-decision admission offers, I recommend you confirm that deferral is allowed under those circumstances).

Completing your college application while you’re still in school, on a regular schedule and in touch with your teachers, administrators, and high school counselors will be infinitely easier than pulling all of that together after graduation. Plus, knowing where you’ll be in a few months or a year will give you peace of mind and allow you to make the most of your semester or year away from school.

How to decide if a gap year is right for you during COVID? It comes down to your plan for using the time, the on-campus experience at the colleges you’re considering, and the financial impact of taking—and not taking—a year off.

Making a Plan

Most colleges support students who are interested in taking gap years to travel, work, or serve a community. In fact, there is a wide variety of internship, fellowship, and travel programs targeting people in between high school and college. Some colleges even have built-in gap semesters, offering students the chance to spend their first semesters abroad or in an environment outside the classroom. (Take note: Travel abroad gap semesters will likely be affected by COVID-19). A few examples of gap year activities:

- Serving your community as an AmeriCorp or Service Year Alliance

volunteer;

- Enrolling in a gap year program through your college (The University of North Carolina offers a year-long global fellowship that, as this book went to press, is still on, though the program is monitoring coronavirus carefully);
- Working/interning (remotely or in-person, if applicable) for an organization in your academic or professional area of interest

After you receive your acceptance letter, talk to your college to see if they'll let you start a semester or year later than you had originally planned. Find out what your college needs from you in order to consider your deferment request. Most schools require a formal letter including a description of what you plan to do with your time away from school and, occasionally, a deposit to save your spot. As with most college-related activities, there will be a deadline. Find out what it is before you try to delay your enrollment. Keep in mind: Even if you've already applied for financial aid your senior year, you will need to reapply by completing the FAFSA before you return to school after your gap year. Be sure to ask your college about its financial aid policies for deferred enrollment students.

Considering Your (Would-Be) Campus Experience

Delve carefully into the remote, in-person, and blended course options at the schools on your list. Will you still have a meaningful college experience that allows you to make lasting friendships with your peers and network connections with your professors? While no one can predict what will happen, as we went to press most schools were planning to offer some kind of on-campus instruction at least in the spring term of 2021—if not in the fall of 2020, as well. Find out as much as possible about the plans for your schools to see if the “new normal” is something you can get on board with.

Financial Considerations

A year without having to pay college tuition might seem like a no-brainer financially. But, there are actually certain financial advantages to completing your degree as soon as possible—even if that involves remote learning. Here's the advice my friend Kal Chany, author of *Paying for College*, gives to those considering a gap year:

- If a large number of students decide to take a gap year, that means a big chunk of students' entry into the workforce will be pushed further into the future. In that case, those who stay the course and graduate sooner will find themselves in a smaller pool of graduates seeking work that

requires a college degree—and they will boost both their lifetime earnings potential and their savings by having more time making a premium wage in the workforce before they retire.

- Right now, students and their families have much more leverage in securing larger scholarships and institutional grant aid as colleges are more desperate to maintain enrollment. But in future years, the situation will likely swing back and become more favorable to education providers.
- The rates on federal education loans are extremely low right now as the decline in economic activity due to COVID-19 has also resulted in a decline in interest rates. It will likely be cheaper in the long run to borrow *now*, given the fact that all newly originated federal loans have fixed interest rates for the life of the particular loan taken out in a given academic year.

The bottom line? If you have a clear sense of what you want to do with your gap year and a concrete opportunity to pursue it, then deferring college enrollment might be the right choice for you. And, while the coronavirus pandemic may limit the type of gap year experience you can have, there are still plenty of opportunities to have meaningful experiences. Depending on learning styles and thinking patterns, though, it can be difficult for some students to reenter the structure and schedule of university life after a year away. Take plenty of time to reflect and good luck!

How can a parent participate most effectively in their child's college application process?

I love this question. Parents, I know the college admission process can be a stressful one for you, too. Family members can be the biggest cheerleaders for the kids in their lives going through the process, but they often don't know *how or how much* to be involved. Sometimes parents hold back because they feel shaky themselves on the admission process or feel that applying to college is an important rite of passage that students should do all on their own. Other parents feel their best role is to act as hand-holder or drill sergeant, putting their kids through their college application paces.

Family members can be a huge support to the students in their life by offering both moral and logistical support.

Folks, there is a happy medium! Parents and other family members can be a huge support to the students in their lives by offering both moral and logistical support in tackling that long list of college application tasks. Build up morale by offering to take your applicant on college tours and to visit college fairs. Help them research and compare colleges. Ask lots of questions! As COVID brings new health and safety protocols to college campuses nationwide, you'll want to make sure the coronavirus response for the schools on your child's list is one you both feel comfortable with.

When it comes to college conversations, my six biggest tips are:

1. **Set some ground rules.** This might seem like a no brainer, but it's extremely important for parents to get their own college worries in check before broaching these weighty topics with students. You want conversations with your child to be positive and productive. Don't pass your stress along to your students because they may not want to open up to you later when they hit an application snag. Your kids are going to take their cues from you about how to approach the college admission process. Remember you're on stage all the time. You don't have to be perfect, but when you sense yourself losing your perspective, revert back to setting good examples.

2. **Start early.** This is the MOST popular piece of advice given by parents who have gone through the process. (About 50 percent of respondents to our annual Colleges Hopes & Worries Survey say this). Refer back to Chapter 3, where I outline exactly what students should be doing in 9th, 10th, 11th, and 12th grades to prepare for the college admission process. I've said it before, folks, but planning ahead won't just set your child up to succeed, it will actually make the process so much less stressful. (More about stress, later!)
3. **Help students find balance.** It's possible to be too focused on getting into college. Of course, we all want our children and students to care about their futures. But if they make every decision in high school based on how it will look to colleges, they're trying to game the system rather than follow their own interests. That never works in college admissions, and it doesn't make for a happy, confident kid, either. So, don't tie everything students do to college. Help them find a balance between college planning and the other parts of their lives. They'll be more content and more successful college applicants if you do. (Pro tip: Implement a "college-free" talk zone at the dinner table or on the ride home from school so your kids can get a break from college overload!)
4. **Create a rock-solid support system.** There's a reason you don't ask your doctor to do your taxes or your accountant to diagnose your knee pain. Go to the right sources. Your child's high school counselor, college websites, college guidebooks, admission officers, representatives at virtual information sessions, and students who attend the schools are good sources.
5. **Help your child figure out the kind of college atmosphere in which they'll thrive academically, personally, socially, and, yes, financially.** This all goes back to "best fit colleges," which I discuss back in Chapter 1. It's not all about where your child can get in, where you, the parent, went to college, or the college with the best name recognition. You're looking for the schools that will fit your student to a T. You know your child best (and probably feel you know best about where they would thrive), but be patient with your child as they work through the journey. Communicate your opinions but be open to negotiating with your student and to compromise. That being said, do talk about finances and college costs early on, and make sure a financial safety school (one your child would be thrilled to attend) makes it on their list.
6. **Ask your student: "What's the best way for me to help you?"** Parents who deliver meticulously organized file folders with college lists and typed up college essays to their teen's door are likely to be

met with more than a few eye rolls. (It goes without saying that parents should NEVER write their child's essays or fill out their applications for them). Let your child take the reins on certain pieces of the process and slowly gain more and more responsibility. This is the first major project your child is going to undertake with no final grade and no teacher leading the way! Your role is to help him or her strategize, divide, and conquer.

That's my advice for parents. But what about advice for students? Lean on your parents when you need to, but don't let them make all the decisions!

Parent to Parent: 8 Tips Parents of College-Bound Students Need to Know

1. "Listen to your child!—Maureen, Middletown, NY
2. "Allow your child to dream about anything he can be!" — Susan, Remsenburg, NJ
3. "Be a guide and not a choice-maker. Believe in your child's own intuitions and advocate for their personal interests." — Alice, Randolph, NJ
4. "As a parent, allow your kid to experience the college application for themselves. While it is imperative to gently look over their shoulders, taking over full control doesn't allow them to make important decisions for themselves." — Danielle, Lambertville, NJ
5. "Be encouraging but not micromanaging. Remind your child of upcoming deadlines and help them proofread their essays. Start early in researching colleges that might be a good fit. Help your child pick out a good review manual for the ACT and/or SAT." —Carole, Livonia, MI
6. "I know some parents who are literally obsessing over this whole process. I hope they don't forget that it is their child that is going to college, not them." —Nancy, WI
7. "Focus on your child and what is best for him/her and try not to focus on all the competition between parents. This is about your child, not about you." —Carol, Tarrytown, NY
8. "Parents, back off! Applicants, relax!" —D.B., Monterey, CA

—College Hopes & Worries Survey

How do I balance schoolwork, extracurriculars, test prep, college applications, family, social life, and SANITY?!

In the words of one recent college applicant who completed our annual College Hopes & Worries Survey: “Whoever said that senior year is the easiest is a liar.”

I do not envy the schedule of today’s high school students one bit. As they juggle homework, family life, and extracurriculars, all amidst a global pandemic, college-bound students are facing very serious pressures, not the least of which is the overwhelming terrain of the college admission process.

Just know that you are not alone. I hope that this book has done some good in diffusing the perceived enormity of the process and has reassured you that colleges understand that admissions during COVID is uncharted territory—for everyone. Now that you understand the timeline and have a sense of the steps you need to accomplish, take a deep breath and dig in.

“It’s easier to break a boulder into pieces than trying to move it all at once.”

First, it’s important to get organized. Make a college checklist of all the things you need to do for your applications. (We’ve got a great one in the Appendix.) From asking teachers for college recommendations to applying for financial aid and scholarships, assign yourself deadlines and put them all on the list. Then, plot your application-related deadlines in a notebook or calendar app along with your homework, projects, and papers. Don’t forget to schedule time on the calendar for your away games or work shifts. The goal is to map out everything you must accomplish over the month, semester, or year.

Not only does this system ensure that nothing falls through the cracks, but plotting your schedule will help you see your pressure points. Do you have a college application deadline and a major chem final on the same day? Avoid a head-on collision by getting your application done early! Remember, you can’t necessarily study too far in advance, but you can work on your

applications whenever you have some down time—like drafting those college essays over spring or summer break.

Ok, you’ve laid out all your to-dos in a big old grid/worksheet/calendar. Now what? Take things one step at a time. Break your big projects into little ones. It’s easier to plan, and every task you get done will help you feel more confident and accomplished. As one college counselor I know puts it, “It’s easier to break a boulder into pieces than trying to move it all at once.”

Remember: You have a support system. Your friends, your parents, and your college counselors are all in your corner. Just talking with others can be a source of help, as well to relieve some of the stress of becoming too wrapped up in your own situation. Take advantage of workshops your guidance office may offer on specific aspects of the admission process. At The Princeton Review, our YouTube channel is packed with playlists just for you on many college admission topics from applying during COVID-19 to the latest SAT, ACT, and AP exam updates. (Check them out at [YouTube.com/ThePrincetonReview](https://www.youtube.com/ThePrincetonReview).)

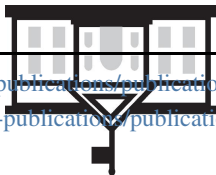
The bottom line on stress? Though there isn’t much that students can do to get the colleges to send out those big and little envelopes any faster, there are some strategies to prevent the worst stress. If you ask lots of questions to help you understand the process, start early, take it one step at a time, and apply to several carefully selected, appropriate schools, you can rest assured that you’ve done everything in your power to make the process go as smoothly as possible.

5 Things a College Counselor Can Do for You

1. **Lower your college stress.** Applications are stressful, but knowing that there are college experts on your side can make all the difference.
2. **Make a college wishlist.** Talking to your counselor about your dreams and what’s important to you in academics, campus life, and financial aid will help you figure out what you really want out of college.
3. **Find and compare colleges.** College counselors are pros at helping you research the schools that are the right fit to your unique personality and goals.
4. **Help you rise to the top.** Your college counselor will help you position the rest of your application to tell your story through your essays, extracurricular activities, and letters of

recommendation.

5. **Choose the right school for you.** Your counselor will help you craft your list of dream, match and safety schools and create the right application strategy for your college wishlist.



9. <https://www.nacacnet.org/news--publications/publications/state-of-college-admission/>

10. <https://www.nacacnet.org/news--publications/publications/state-of-college-admission/>



Appendix

[College-Bound: Your Admission Checklist](#)

[High School Testing Timeline](#)

[26 Tips for Getting Financial Aid, Scholarships, and Grants and For Paying Less for College](#)

[More Advice from the Experts: Smart Tips from College-Bound Students for Next Year's Applicants](#)

[Parent to Parent: What I Wish I'd Known](#)

College Bound: Your Admission Checklist

What's the trick to less college admission stress? Start early, and take small steps along the way.

Freshman Year



Focus on your grades so you can earn placement for more rigorous courses.



Practice your study skills, identify support resources available, and ask for help if you need it.



Get to know your school and community! Explore clubs, sports, volunteer opportunities, and more.



Take any appropriate SAT Subject Tests.

Sophomore Year



Continue to challenge yourself academically.



Develop constructive relationships with your teachers.



Get to know your school counselor.



Commit to the activities that you really enjoy, and try to take on more responsibility.



Take any appropriate SAT Subject Tests.

Summer Before Junior Year



This is the perfect time to prep for the SAT and ACT.



Begin your college research.

Junior Year



Take the SAT and ACT when you're ready.



Balance schoolwork and outside-school interests.



Take the most challenging courses available to you.



Take the PSAT/NMSQT in October to qualify for a National Merit Scholarship and other scholarship opportunities.



Start gathering teacher recommendations.



Narrow your college list and try to visit one or two campuses, if it's safe to do so. Virtual college tours and online information sessions are your friends!



Make a plan to prepare for AP exams in May and SAT Subject Tests in June.



Learn about financial aid and available scholarships.

Summer Before Senior Year



Start working on your application and prewriting college essays—they take longer than you think!



Make a calendar of all your application deadlines so you can stay on track.



If possible, consider visiting colleges that have made it to the top of your

target list.



If you are applying for Early Decision, you should take the SAT or ACT no later than September.

Senior Fall



Apply early if you're a strong candidate.



Wrap up your applications and stay on top of deadlines for apps, scholarships, and financial aid.



Don't get senioritis! Senior grades matter—your first term grades will definitely be used in the admission process.



Complete your last SAT/ACT by December at the latest.

Senior Spring



If you still have AP exams to take, study!



Send thank-you notes to your recommenders.



Get ready to celebrate! Spring is all about acceptance letters rolling in.



Talk to friends, family, and counselors before making your final choice.



Once you decide, don't look back! Read through your college's course catalog, and look forward to the next four years.

Here's Another Helpful Resource

The college profiles on The Princeton Review's website contain meticulously researched information that will help you narrow the

search for the best college for you. Browse user-friendly profiles and get answers to your questions about tuition and other costs, average test scores, popular majors, student housing, and key campus organizations at [PrincetonReview.com/college-search](https://www.princetonreview.com/college-search).

Find out more about kicking off your college search in Chapter 1.

High School Testing Timeline

Extracurricular activities, school commitments, and other factors place into when and how you're going to prepare for the SAT and ACT.

If you're taking both tests, you need to leave enough time to take each test twice. It's ideal for students to prep for the SAT over the summer and take the PSAT in October. You'll be ready for the PSAT because you will have already prepared for the SAT.

Folks, there's no perfect plan. Here's what I recommend for students going into their junior year.

Prep for the SAT and ACT, AP Exams, and SAT Subject Tests



Summer before junior year: Prep for the SAT and take it in August or October for the first time.



October: Take the PSAT.



November/December: Take the SAT one more time.



February: Start prepping for the ACT and take it for the first time.



April: Take the ACT one more time.



May: Study, and take your AP tests.



June: Sign up for one to three SAT Subject Tests.



Summer before senior year: You can take the SAT or ACT one more time if necessary. If you take a summer test, you receive scores in time for Early Action or Early Decision deadlines.

26 Tips for Getting Financial Aid, Scholarships, and Grants and for Paying Less for College

When it comes to actually paying for college, there is a lot of information out there. A great resource is our annual book *Paying for College* by my friend Kalman Chany. Here, I present some tips from Kal for applying for financial aid and trimming the costs of college.

Getting Financial Aid

1. **Learn how financial aid works.** The more and the sooner you know about how need-based aid eligibility is determined, the better you can take steps to maximize such eligibility.
2. **Apply for financial aid no matter what your circumstances.** Some merit-based aid can only be awarded if the applicant has submitted financial aid application forms.
3. **Don't wait until the student is accepted to apply for financial aid.** Do it when applying for admission.
4. **Complete all the required aid applications.** All students seeking aid must submit the FAFSA (Free Application for Federal Student Aid); other forms may also be required. Check with each college to see what's required and when.
5. **Get the best scores you can on the SAT or ACT.** They are used not only in decisions for admission but they can also impact financial aid. If your scores and other stats exceed the school's admission criteria, you are likely to get a better aid package than a marginal applicant.
6. **Apply strategically to colleges.** Your chances of getting aid will be better at schools that have generous financial aid budgets. (Check the Financial Aid Ratings for various schools on [PrincetonReview.com](https://www.princetonreview.com/college-rankings/financial-aid).)
7. **Don't rule out any school as too expensive.** A generous aid award from a pricey private school can make it less costly than a public school with a lower sticker price.
8. **Take advantage of education tax benefits.** A dollar saved on taxes is worth the same as a dollar in scholarship aid. Look into Coverdells, 529 Plans, education tax credits, and loan deductions.

Scholarships and Grants

1. **Get your best possible score on the PSAT:** It is the National Merit Scholarship Qualifying Test and also used in the selection of students for other scholarships and recognition programs.
2. **Check your eligibility for grants and scholarships from your state.** Some (but not all) states will allow you to use such funds out of state.
3. **Look for scholarships locally.** Find out if your employer offers scholarships or tuition assistance plans for employees or family members. Also look into scholarships from your community groups and high school, as well as your church, temple, or mosque.
4. **Look for outside scholarships realistically:** they account for less than five percent of aid awarded. Research them at [PrincetonReview.com](https://www.princetonreview.com) or other free sites. Steer clear of scholarship search firms that charge fees and “promise” scholarships.

Paying for College

1. **Start saving early when the student is an infant.** Too late? Start now. The more you save, the less you’ll have to borrow.
2. **Invest wisely.** Considering a 529 plan? Compare your own state’s plan which may have tax benefits with other states’ programs. Get info at [savingforcollege.com](https://www.savingforcollege.com).
3. **If you have to borrow, first pursue federal education loans (Direct or PLUS).** Avoid private loans at all costs.
4. **Never put tuition on a credit card.** The debt is more expensive than ever given recent changes to interest rates and other fees some card issuers are now charging.
5. **Try not to take money from a retirement account or 401(k) to pay for college.** In addition to likely early distribution penalties and additional income taxes, the higher income will reduce your aid eligibility.

Paying Less for College

1. **Attend a community college for two years and transfer to a pricier school to complete the degree.** Plan ahead: Be sure the college you plan to transfer to will accept the community college credits.

2. **Look into “cooperative education” programs.** Over 900 colleges allow students to combine college education with a job. It can take longer to complete a degree this way. But graduates generally owe less in student loans and have a better chance of getting hired.
3. **Take as many AP courses as possible and get high scores on AP exams.** Many colleges award course credits for high AP scores. Some students have cut a year off their college tuition this way.
4. **Earn college credit via “dual enrollment” programs available at some high schools.** These allow students to take college level courses during their senior year.
5. **Earn college credits by taking CLEP (College-Level Examination Program) exams.** Depending on the college, a qualifying score on any of the thirty-three CLEP exams can earn students three to twelve college credits.
6. **Stick to your college and your major.** Changing colleges can result in lost credits. Aid may be limited/not available for transfer students at some schools. Changing majors can mean paying for extra courses to meet requirements.
7. **Finish college in three years if possible.** Take the maximum number of credits every semester, attend summer sessions, and earn credits via online courses. Some colleges offer three-year programs for high-achieving students.
8. **Let Uncle Sam pay for your degree.** ROTC (Reserve Officer Training Corps) programs available from U.S. Armed Forces branches (except the Coast Guard) offer merit-based scholarships up to full tuition via participating colleges in exchange for military service after you graduate.
9. **Better yet:** Attend a tuition-free college.

Please visit [PrincetonReview.com/college-advice](https://www.princetonreview.com/college-advice) for the most up-to-date information on available financial aid programs.

More Advice from the Experts: Smart Tips from College-Bound Students for Next Year's Applicants

Every year on our College Hopes & Worries Survey, we include an optional question at the end that asks respondents what advice they have for next year's applicants and parents of applicants. Here, in their own words, are the suggestions and tips of our respondents. Enjoy!

On the College Application Process

"Start early. As a matter of fact, start now."

"Two Words: Start Early! Deadlines creep up quicker than you may anticipate. In addition, there are little things that you need to do to fulfill the application requirements. By starting early you can reduce stress levels and assure that you have enough time to get everything finished without rushing."

"Research, research, research. The better educated you are about the colleges, the better chance you will get the education you really want."

"Be excited to write your college application essays. They WILL definitely be tough, but in the end, you'll look back at the experience and smile because you learn so much about yourself as a human being. It's actually quite a wonderful experience, but only if you're willing to make it a wonderful experience."

"Make sure that you apply or consider all the schools that you could possibly conceive yourself going to. Nothing is worse than 'February syndrome' in which you realize you didn't apply to a school that you could see yourself attending."

On Stress

"College is about finding your happiness, not your parents' happiness or what would look good on your bumper. Be open-minded."

"Don't get frustrated with applications. Just think of how good you'll feel in the fall walking the halls of your chosen college."

"Have fun with it! If you enjoy the process along the way, the outcome will hopefully be more beneficial."

“Do not get too nervous. It’s not always about getting into the most known school.”

“Don’t worry! It’s going to be okay.”

On Money Matters

“Don’t let the cost of a college scare you. Apply anyways because financial aid is always available.”

“Money is a huge factor for both you and your child. It is extremely important that you give your child a ‘budget’ for your peace of mind and theirs.”

“Scholarships! Make sure you apply for as many scholarships as possible.”

“Don’t give up, apply to your dream school even if you can’t afford it, you might be surprised by how much financial aid is offered.”

“More expensive colleges are not always better colleges.”

On Rejection

“When you think you didn’t get into the school you wanted, you might be getting into the school you needed.”

“You are smart. Don’t let a rejection letter make you feel depressed.”

“There is a place for everyone. Relax and think of it as a journey—not a race to be won, but a home to be found.”

“It’s not as bad as everyone makes it out to be. Don’t worry so much about where you’re going. Worry more about the mindset you go to school with.”

“Try not to stress too much about the possibility of not being accepted into your first-choice college, because you’ll go half mad if you do so.”

On Choosing Which College to Attend

“Don’t worry so much about what other people think is the best college for you. The only opinion that matters is your own because you will be the one spending four years of your life there. Pick the college you feel most comfortable at.”

“Learn as much as you can about the college application process. Things have changed so much from the time my parents went through this.”

“Don’t rule out schools just because they aren’t Ivy League caliber. Smaller schools have a lot to offer.”

“Don’t focus on your first choice. Widen your eyes to keep your options open.”

Here’s Another Helpful Book

My book *Colleges That Create Futures: 50 Schools That Launch Careers By Going Beyond the Classroom* salutes an extraordinary group of institutions with compelling commitments to helping students segue to successful careers and post-graduate accomplishments.

Check out a sampling of noteworthy campus experiences in Chapter 1.

Parent to Parent: What I Wish I'd Known

Every year on our College Hopes & Worries Survey, we include an optional question at the end that asks respondents what advice they have for next year's applicants and parents of applicants. Here's what the parents had to say.

On the College Application Process

"Start sooner!" —Linda, Tampa FL

"Start early, and save early for their future." —Loreli, Chandler, AZ

"Start early! Visit schools in sophomore year, concentrate on testing in junior year, apply in senior year." —Karen, Woodinville, WA

"Start preparing in your child's first year of high school. Don't wait until third year." —Carlene, Roseville, CA

"Start the whole process a year earlier than you think you need to." —Amy, Glen Ellyn, IL

"When thinking about which schools to consider, our daughter seemed stuck because she isn't sure what she wants to be. We tried to help her just think about three to five things she likes and would want to learn more about. That seemed to help take off the pressure and get her 'unstuck' with choosing some schools to visit." —Ellen, New Paltz, NY

"Create a calendar with deadlines, test dates, college events and visits, etc. This will eliminate a lot of stress for you and your child." —Sandee, Los Gatos, CA

"Treat the application process like a job. Set a regular time each week to tackle some aspect of the process." —Laura, ME

"After your child applies, the schools will allow you access to their website to track your application information. Keep track of all of your child's passwords and website access information. Because schools use different safety systems, you can end up with different user IDs and passwords at each school. If you apply to more than three schools, this can be quite confusing." —Cheryl, Stevenson Ranch, CA

"Do what you can to make sure your child 'owns' the entire application

process. Start the FAFSA and CSS early as they require a lot of information and pay careful attention to the instructions. Don't wait until the last day to apply for anything as the servers frequently get overloaded." —James, CA

On Stress

"Relax! Somehow, it all comes together. Everyone goes through it, so ask your family and friends for advice/help. You will be surprised at the great advice you can gather that way." —Sharon, Brielle, NJ

"Your child will not be nearly as stressed as you will be." —Lynda, Sunrise, FL

"Don't spend too much time comparing notes with others going through the process. Makes people crazy." —Sarah, Newton, MA

"Try not to stress too much—enjoy the process and make the most of the time you spend with your child, talking about his/her interests, helping them take that big step." —Sharon, Amherst, MA

"Make sure to take the college process in steps and you won't feel so overwhelmed." —Denise, Sea Girt, NJ

On Parenting

"Listen to your child!" —Maureen, Middletown, NY

"Allow your child to dream about anything he can be!" —Susan, Remsenburg, NJ

"Be a guide and not a choice-maker. Believe in your child's own intuitions and advocate for their personal interests." —Alice, Randolph, NJ

"As a parent, allow your kid to experience the college application for themselves. While it is imperative to gently look over their shoulders, taking over full control doesn't allow them to make important decisions for themselves." —Danielle, Lambertville, NJ

"I know some parents who are literally obsessing over this whole process. I hope they don't forget that it is their child that is going to college, not them." —Nancy, WI

On Money Matters

"Look at the average financial aid package, not just cost, and don't say no

to yourself (your child) on behalf of a school by never applying to it.” — Charles, Philadelphia, PA

“Dare to dream. Don’t limit your child’s vision of their future by your own financial worries.” —Karen, VA

“Don’t be scared off from applying to private schools as opposed to public universities. Private schools can be very generous with scholarship offers.” — Diane, Chicago IL

“Let your child be free to see what schools will accept your child and see what the financials are later. In other words, do not assume a school is too much money as a reason not to apply. Particularly if your child has done well on ACT/SAT, the tuition number at a private school is not going to be the number you will have to fund.” —Alan, MI

“Do your homework on the entire process, including understanding how the financial aid process works, and don’t wait until the last minute to delve into this stuff.” —Ken, Colorado Springs, CO

On Choosing Which College to Attend

“Let your student take the lead in defining interests and schools that could be a good fit. Don’t focus on labels. An excellent education can be had in schools you’ve never heard about before.” —C.L., Ridgewood, NJ

“Don’t be overly focused on ‘brand name’ colleges. There are other excellent choices that offer very good value, and are quite affordable.” — Mark, Macungie, PA

“Don’t focus on a major so much as interests and opportunities. Nobody is sure at 18 what they want to do. The beauty of college is you have a chance to expand your horizons and perspective.” —Larry, Bayside, NY

“There are many good colleges out there—not just the ten that everyone is applying to.” —M.M., Far Hills, NJ

“Make the final decision after receiving all the financial aid packages.” — Kathleen, FL

Here’s Another Helpful Book

The K&W Guide to Colleges for Students with Learning Differences profiles over 338 schools highly recommended for such students. It includes strategies to help them successfully apply to the best

programs for their needs, plus advice from learning specialists on making an effective transition to college.



About the Author

Rob Franek, Editor-in-Chief at The Princeton Review, is a nationally recognized expert on higher education and a college aficionado. He visits more than 50 colleges a year. Over his 26-year career in education, he has served as a college admissions administrator, test prep teacher, author, and lecturer. He is lead author of The Princeton Review's annual books, *The Best 386 Colleges*, and *The Best Value Colleges*. He is also author of *Colleges That Create Futures: 50 Schools That Launch Careers by Going Beyond the Classroom*, and co-author of *If the U Fits: Expert Advice on Finding the Right College and Getting Accepted*. Rob gives dozens of presentations a year to audiences of teachers, parents, and students on trending education and college topics. Follow his Tweets at [@RobFranek](#).



Penguin
Random
House

What's next on your reading list?

**Discover your next
great read!**

**Get personalized book picks and up-to-date news about this
author.**

Sign up now.